CITIZEN'S ASSEMBLY

Gender norms and stereotyping: Text to accompany powerpoint delivered on February 15th2020

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1. Definitions

In addressing this topic I think it would be good to start with some definitions. The distinction between such key terms as sex and gender is often unclear and still debated, with some writers in the field resorting to talking about sex/gender as though the terms were interchangeable. In every day usage they often are. However I think it is helpful to use sex when we are talking about the biological differences between males and females, men and women. Sex is multiply determined, involving chromosomal patterns and levels of certain hormones as well as the obvious characteristics to do with the appearance of genitalia. It is the case that a small number of babies are born with ambiguous genitalia, maybe 1 in 2,000. Some children and adults become unhappy with the sex they have been assigned at birth, a state termed gender dysphoria, and seek to identify as the opposite sex, a transition usually labelled transgender. Some of these people may go further and change their secondary sexual characteristics (by taking hormones, removing their penis, breasts, etc.) to conform to those of the opposite sex and people who make this transition are termed transsexual. Another response to the black and white male-female distinction is to identify as non-binary. People who make this choice may dress and behave in a non-gender-typed manner and refuse to use the pronouns he and she, preferring to be called 'they'. Anyone who resists our deeply embedded need to divide humans into boys and girls, men and women and to expect people to stay in those categories for life may find themselves dealing with a lot of bewilderment and even active discrimination.

Gender can be defined as a person's social identification as male or female, masculine or feminine. Gender can be seen to exist on a continuum, people vary in the strength of their manifestation of masculine or feminine traits and people also show a complex mix of traits with most people behaving at times in a way that might be culturally deemed as more appropriate for the opposite sex.

Sexuality is another linked issue and refers to a person's sexual orientation and desires. Traditionally we expect a person's sex, gender and sexuality to fit neatly together. Thus a male is expected to be masculine and be attracted to women. In reality a male can be feminine and heterosexual. A female can identify as non-binary and attracted to women. Many permutations are possible.

Norms and standards govern all aspects of our social lives. In relation to sex roles they vary markedly from society to society, from historical period to historical period.

A social stereotype can be defined as 'an overgeneralized belief about a particular category of people' and sex role stereotypes are the beliefs we hold about male and female natures and capacities. Some of them seem relatively innocuous, such as, 'Real men don't eat quiche' or 'Women love to gossip,' but they can serve to constrain people's options and opportunities and may form the

basis for discrimination and the infringement of human rights. Sexism is found where there is active discrimination against males, females or non-binary persons on the basis of their sex.

The impact of stereotypes can be seen when stereotypes influence the way people behave towards others or the way they think about themselves. For example, a father who thinks that boys should not cry may react negatively when his son cries and even tell him that 'Big boys don't cry'. The boy may develop his own stereotype about boys and crying and try not to cry, saying to himself, 'I'm a boy, I mustn't cry. ' Stereotypes about men's or women's capacities and competences may lead to discrimination in employment choices. If the stereotype 'Women are soft and emotional' is held by prospective employers, it is less likely that a woman would be hired for the tough leadership role they are seeking to fill. Stereotypes lead to fewer options in terms of consumer choice. The stereotype that' Little girls love things that are pink and fluffy and cute' leads to aisles of pink frilly clothing, covered in bunnies and unicorns. This stereotype has emerged only in the last 100 years. Previously pink was seen as a strong colour suitable for boys and light blue as soft and delicate and suitable for girls. At worst stereotypes restrict and constrain the sexes, causing misery and undermining human rights. Thus the stereotype that women are fit only to serve men can lead to sexual and domestic abuse.

2. Where do the differences between the sexes that we see around us come from?

The sources of differences between the sexes are complex and multiple. The most obvious one is biology. At conception the sex of the human embryo is determined by the genes on the 23rd pair of chromosomes. If the combination consists of an X and a Y chromosome the child is a male and if the two chromosomes are X-shaped the child is a female. At birth there are discernible differences between boys and girls aside from their genitalia. Baby boys are bigger, more active and more vulnerable but the overlap in characteristics is considerable. As children get older other differences emerge that seem to have biological roots. For example girls seem to develop language earlier than boys, on average. By the time they are teenagers and affected by puberty sexual characteristics emerge that distinguish males from females more obviously. The different roles of males and females in reproduction are another marked difference with biological origins.

But many of the differences we observe between the sexes are due to social factors. We seem to take the biological differences that exist and build on them. Society often chooses to exaggerate the differences between the sexes and to explain them as inevitable and biologically determined. This phenomenon is known as biological essentialism, the idea that males and females are essentially different in how they think and act because of their biology. One might respond to an argument for essentialism by pointing out both the dramatic changes in the roles of males and females over the centuries and the striking level of difference in expected roles cross-culturally. We no longer think that letting women study in universities would be bad for their mental and physical health (Women were not admitted to TCD until 1904) or that women should not compete in the Olympics (they were not allowed to do so until 1900).

Lack of opportunity can create biological differences. For example the strong view held in the not too distant past that women are useless at throwing balls lead to girls being excluded from playing games like cricket and never learning to throw overarm or to throw powerfully. All prejudices can become self-fulfilling. Until recently many Irish single sex schools did not offer Higher Maths for girls on the assumption that girls are not able to do well in maths. Boys still do better at maths at Leaving

Certificate level but girls are catching up, now that they have the chance. Girls in Israel and in some Asian countries do better. Gender typing is the process by which children acquire the attitudes, values and behaviours that are associated with their assigned sex in the society to which they belong. Stereotypes are one aspect of this process but they are important in the formation and perpetuation of people's attitudes and behaviours.

The video shown during the presentation is based on a study first conducted by Condry and Condry in 1976 (1). In this BBC video (https://youtu.be/nWu44AqF0iI)we see babies being dressed in clothes 'belonging' to the opposite sex and then observe how adults treat them differently according to whether they think they are playing with a girl baby or a boy baby. It demonstrates how the beliefs that people hold influence their behaviour even if they claim not to hold those beliefs. Thus people who claim to treat girl and boy children equally may hold unconscious beliefs and biases about sex roles that affect their behaviour.

Maccoby and Jacklin were US-based psychologists who conducted pioneering research on the differences between males and females. In their 1974 book (2) on the psychology of sex differences they concluded that 'most gender role stereotypes are cultural myths'. They looked at beliefs such as 'Women talk more than men' and found no evidence for them. They found a few statistical differences, e.g. boys being better at maths and more aggressive and girls having better language skills, but pointed out that the origin of these differences could be social as much as biological and that therefore they could be open to change.

Despite the lack of evidence for many stereotyped beliefs they still persist and it is worth asking why. We actually use stereotypes a lot in our social life. We have stereotypes about French people, middle-class people, Northsiders etc. They serve as a shorthand and as a way to simplify a complex world. They may also serve the agendas of those who have power or those who feel threatened. Thus is in a male-dominated world, or patriarchy, it might serve men's interests to see women as weaker and less competent. Men might form stereotypes about man-hating, bra-burning 'feminists' if their privilege or sense of superiority is threatened by them.

3. Gender norms and stereotyping in the family

No family is an island and every member of the family is influenced by their history and the community and culture that they belong to. But it is undoubtedly the case that the family is an early and very powerful influence on how a child acquires behaviours and attitudes associated with being ether male or female. How people react to the news that a new baby is a boy or a girl used to start at the moment the child was born. But now, due to advances in technology allowing scans of the developing baby in utero and early DNA testing, many people start to prepare for their baby boy or girl's arrival months before their birth. Gender reveal parties, which are heavily sex-stereotyped, have become fashionable in the US and are already happening in Ireland.

Today, when asked, parents will claim not to treat boys and girls differently but on closer inspection they usually do, whether consciously or subconsciously. Their choice of clothing, toys and room décor is typically sex-typed. And the behaviours parents direct towards their child differ according to the sex of the child, as the BBC film illustrates. Some parents do this a little and some parents do this a lot. In general fathers seem to hold stronger sex stereotypes and often seem more concerned that their boy children are 'masculine' in their choices and behaviours.

4. Children adopt the stereotypes

Small children are busy working out how the world operates and one thing they latch onto is rules. We see this in language development where children will work out that to form plurals you add an s onto words so we get words like 'hats' and 'eggs' but also 'mouses' and 'gooses', because they are not yet aware of irregularities. They work out how sex roles operate also and will form rules like 'Only girls wear pink' and 'Daddies drive cars', ignoring exceptions. One psychologist claims that once children identify as either boy or girl they look around for rules about how they should behave and start thinking along the lines, 'I am a boy therefore I do boy things'(3). This process adds to whatever behaviours are encouraged, reinforced and modelled by their parents and siblings. So by about the age of 3 most children behave and think in a gender-stereotyped manner. They also police the behaviour of other children who infringe the rules. This gender conformity remains strong until about the age of ten, when children become more nuanced in their thinking and more tolerant of deviation from gender norms. The work of Cormac Harris and Alan O'Sullivan, the winners of the 2020 Young Scientists competition shows the degree of sex-role stereotyping in Irish children aged 5-7 and that it is particularly strong among boys(4). Teenagers may become preoccupied with conforming to the expected roles for their sex and can also show a high degree of sex role conformity, particularly when they start becoming interested in sexual relationships. This may be a very difficult time for teenagers who do not conform in relation to their sexuality or in their gender identification.

The social response on the part of peers to infringement of sex-role norms by boys seems stronger than to infringement on the part of girls. Girls who are 'tomboys' risk less stigmatisation and bullying than boys who are 'cissies.' The word cissy is, these days, often replaced in the school yard by the word 'gay'. Why is it more difficult for boys to be feminine than for girls to be masculine? It is argued that the male role in society is more valued. Males also need to *assert* masculinity since it is the active, forceful role and this need to be dominant and assertive comes with a degree of ongoing anxiety about failing to enact and perform the role.

Research carried out with nine-year-olds as part of the Growing Up in Ireland study showed that stereotyping of the opposite sex was very common (www.growingup.ie). Boys and girls were asked what they thought about the opposite sex. These were some of the findings:

BOY 'The girls dress different and play different and they think different'

BOY 'They (*girls*) like to do their make-up and their nails and puppies and everything cute. And they like pink things.'

INTERVIEWER 'And what about boys?'

BOY 'Boys like the outdoors more. They like to stand in a field.'

GIRL 'And they (*boys*) are much more immature than girls I think… They just, when you are trying to be serious with them ...they just like go and mess with their friends or something'.

GIRL 'They (*boys*) are really different. They play different sports, wear different clothes, do different stuff. They spend way too much time watching TV and on the computer and they don't read books unless they are nerds.'

Beliefs about sex differences may become self-fulfilling prophecies as boys and girls confine their behaviours to those suited to their sex and restrict their ambitions along sex-stereotyped lines.

5. How might Ireland counteract sex-role stereotyping?

I preface the following suggestions with a caveat. I am a psychologist, not a legislator or a lawyer. However I was asked to comment on these issues.

Societal change can be brought about through a number of mechanisms. The most overtly political is to bring about change through legislation. In a democracy such legislative change is often preceded by change in the thinking of the populace or at least by change in the majority of the populace. Conversely legislative change can sometimes drive behavioural and attitudinal change. (We all became very pleased with ourselves after smoking was banned in public places in Ireland ahead of other nations, even though this was a top-down legislative change.) In some states a referendum may provide the basis for legislative change. This is the process that prompted the Citizens' Assembly, seen as a fair way of eliciting the views of the people prior to politicians deciding whether or not to hold a constitutional referendum and if so, how it should be framed.

In this country we have laws against discrimination. Discrimination on the grounds of sex is one of the nine grounds of discrimination. We have laws which protect adults and children against abuse in the family and laws against sexual violence.

Many public and private bodies will adopt positions that advocate for equal treatment of the sexes and against sexism. For example, the Irish Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland states that ads 'should avoid stereotyping'.

The use of positive discrimination and quotas is a debated tactic used in the pursuit of equality. Some feel that people should be put on boards or elected to high office only through merit but advocates of positive discrimination point out that society as it is is not fair and that change would take too long and needs to be brought about by official actions designed to include the excluded sex.

Children spend a lot of time in school and are very influenced by what happens in school so this is an arena where changes in knowledge and attitudes can take place, if such changes are agreed to be desirable. Modules designed to raise teachers' awareness of how sex-role conformity operates and how bias can influence their practice can be introduced into teacher training programmes. Gender role awareness training can also be introduced to school curricula, e.g. in Sweden the national pre-school curriculum requires teachers to 'counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles'. In UK the National Union of Teachers conducted a review in 2013 titled 'Stereotypes stop you doing stuff 'and encouraged their members to challenge stereotyping in their classes. In their 2019 study, already mentioned, the Young Scientist winners designed resources to be used in the classroom. The INTO in Ireland has helpful resources on its web site. One called 'We all belong' states, 'This resource, in combination with the use of the picture

books, will bring visibility to all families and boys and girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes'.

Ireland is a signatory to numerous international treaties and we should keep faith with the promises the government has made when signing them on our behalf. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1979) has a treaty setting out their principles which has been ratified by 189 states including Ireland. Article 5(a) requires States Parties to take "all appropriate measures" to "modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women" in an effort to eliminate practices that "are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women''. We are also signatories to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The United Nations' report from the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2013): 'Gender stereotyping as human rights violation' points out, very forcefully, the damage that can be done to people's lives by extreme sex-role stereotyping. The international organisation, Save the Children, comments as follows 'Gender equality is a basic right for all people, including girls, boys and young people. Including equity and equality among and between girls, boys and young people is at the heart of the UNCRC and is key for the full realization of children's rights. Hence, Save the Children believes that it is critical to directly address gender discrimination and promote gender equality in order to advance its vision for a world where every child attains their equal right to survival, protection, development, and participation'.

6. **How might individuals counteract sex-role stereotyping?**

First it is necessary for individuals to be aware of their own thinking about gender and the extent to which they believe and act on stereotypes and then it is important to want to change. Not everyone will agree that this is something they want to change. Unless you break the law, it's a free country!

As a parent or someone who interacts with children through work or family contacts, it is very possible to challenge and cease acting on stereotypes in your daily interactions. Buy the new baby a yellow or grey babygro! Choose books that set out to counter-stereotypes, such as 'Princess Smartpants' or 'The boy in the dress'. Talk to children about their own stereotyped assumptions.

If very motivated you could join an anti-sexism campaign or at least check out their web sites. Some on line examples are: 'Let toys be toys', 'Let clothes be clothes' in the UK; 'pinkstinks' in UK and Germany and 'becausewhy.com' in Australia. If struck by the sex-typing shown by your favourite retailer, whether it be in clothes or toys or décor, you can raise the issue with them or simply say no to buying goods that perpetuate clichéd and restrictive ideas about boys and girls and their preferences.

7. **Conclusions**

- The way in which we think about sex and gender is deeply embedded in our culture and we learn about it from babyhood

- Sex-role stereotyping operates in subtle and not-so-subtle ways

- The goal in challenging stereotypes is not to make the sexes the same.

- Males and females with highly sex-stereotyped behaviour are found to have lower levels of well-being

- Extreme adherence to stereotypes can lead to the dangers of 'toxic masculinity' and 'passive femininity'

- Aim in challenging stereotypes is to allow boys and girls to express their own individuality and not be constrained by rigid stereotypes

- Stereotypes manifest in multiple ways and need to be tackled through multiple forms of action and intervention: formal and informal; by institutions and by individuals.

References

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4. 4. O'Sullivan, K. (2020). BT Young Scientists: Research on gender bias in children wins 2020 prize. *Irish Times*, January 10th.

Further reading

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