

Gender Role Boxes

Presentation and Discussion

This exercise can be a lead-in for discussion around multiple issues. The facilitator could concentrate on sexism and its relationship to domestic and sexual violence or use the exercise to look at how sexism, heterosexism and transphobia are related to one another.

Also explain that while we are looking at the dominant mainstream ideas of gender we want to acknowledge that gender roles may vary depending on ethnicity, culture, class, ability and family etc. Let participants know that in this exercise we are going to ask them to say words that are offensive to some people.

Draw two boxes on the board.

"Act Like a Man" Box

- 1. Ask if anyone has ever been told or heard someone being told to “act like a man”. Write “Act like a man” on top of the first box. Ask “what does it mean to “act like a man” – what are the expectations (which may not be the reality).**

Participants can be invited to come to the board and fill in the boxes or you can do it as a brainstorm. Participants can also do the handout as individuals or in pairs/small groups first. Remember that this exercise seeks to look at stereotypes, not at individual behavior.

How are men supposed to be different from women? - stronger, tougher, in control

What feelings is a "real man" supposed to have?- anger, superiority, confidence

How do "real men" express their feelings?- yelling, fighting, silence

How are "real men" supposed to act sexually?- aggressive, dominant, with women

- 2. What are names applied to persons outside the box? (write these outside the box and around the box)**

Wimp, fag, queer, pussy, gay

Note: These words are important to say and to write down, but ask participants to answer this question calmly and respectfully as possible.

- 3. What things happen physically to people outside the box? (write these outside the box and around the box)**

Fights, beat up, harassed, teased, abused, ignored

"Act Like a Lady" Box

- 1. Ask if anyone has ever been told or heard someone being told to “act like a lady”. Write “Act like a lady” on top of the second box. Ask “what does it mean to “act like a lady” – what are the expectations (which may not be the reality).**

Participants can be invited to come to the board and fill in the boxes or you can do it as a brainstorm. Participants can also do the handout as individuals or in pairs/small groups first. Remember that this exercise seeks to look at stereotypes, not at individual behavior.

How are women supposed to be different from men? - nicer, weaker, more gossip

What feelings is a "real woman" supposed to have?- fear, sadness, low self-esteem

How do "real women" express their feelings?- crying, screaming, hysteria

How are "real women" supposed to act sexually?- follow the man, don't sleep around

2. What are names applied to persons outside the box? (write these outside the box and around the box)

Dyke, tomboy, slut, ho, whore, lesbian

Note: These words are important to say and to write down, but ask participants to answer this question calmly and respectfully as possible.

3. What things happen physically to people outside the box? (write these outside the box and around the box)

Harassed, abused, ignored, raped, bad reputation

Reflection Questions: Homophobia/Heterosexism

(You could also use some of the questions in the next section)

1. What do you notice about the influence of male and female stereotypes on sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia? (You may want to break this into three separate questions.)
2. How do the stereotypes listed from the boxes relate to stereotypes for straight and queer people?

Reflection Questions: Sexism and Domestic and Sexual Violence

1. What is the implication of the names that men get called?
2. How many men here are in the box all of the time?
3. How many of the women here are inside this box all of the time?
4. What should a "man" do if he gets called these names? Would that put him back inside the box?
5. If a man stays inside the box does he generally avoid getting called names and harassed etc?
6. If a woman stays inside the box does she stay safe safe? Are women inside the box ever raped or abused by their partners? (Yes) What does that say about the suggestion that women stay inside the box? Does it really bring them safety or power?
7. Which box has more power?
8. How do these boxes contribute to the existence of domestic and sexual violence?
9. How do we change these societal expectations?

Key Points

1. These are expectations by society and are not realistic.

2. Men that stay inside the box are generally (though not always) safe from the harassment that occurs outside the box.
3. Men who leave the box are accused of being “women” or “gay”
4. Men who are accused of being outside the box could retaliate in an aggressive fashion and then put themselves back into the box.
5. Women who stay inside the box are not “safe” as promised but are raped or abused as often as women outside the box. The only benefit being that they may be believed by society more often than women outside the box.