

# Introductory Exercise 1

“I never understood all this gender stuff. Now I really see it. A village woman in Jarkhand is not allowed to touch the plow. That means that she can never earn the same livelihood like her husband.”

male staff member,  
CARE India

“So now I tell myself, ‘No, I am not going to get swayed by what my father says. I’m not going to get swayed by what my husband says. I have to find my own perspective.’ ”

woman, India

## Exploring Gender and Culture

### Introduction

CARE is committed to overcoming gender discrimination. We often start training our staff with some basic gender awareness exercises. Understanding that society’s expectations for us as men and women are not necessarily related to our biological differences is a good first step to understanding how gender discrimination affects our lives, our programs, and our project goals.

### Objectives

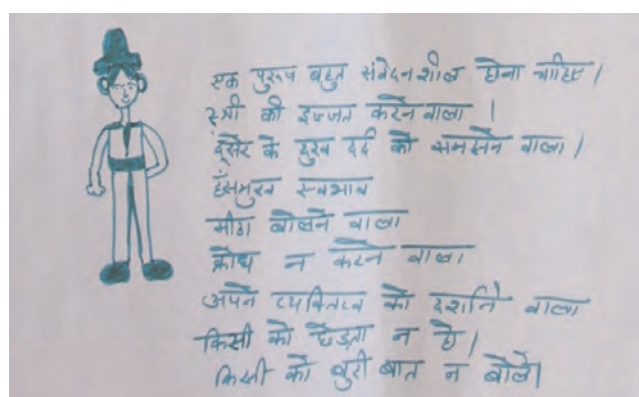
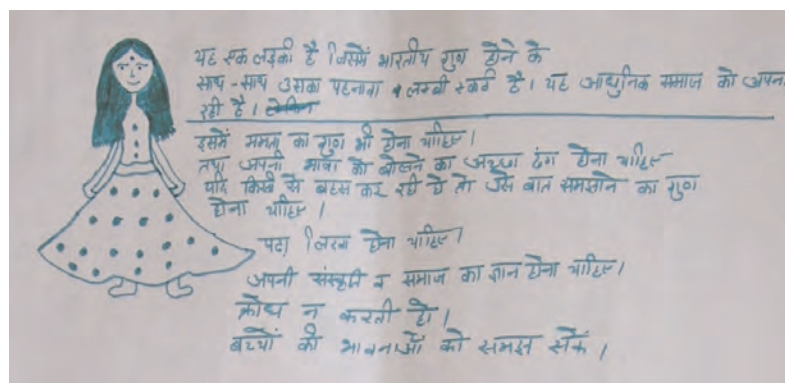
- To distinguish between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’
- To explore the idea of socially-defined gender roles
- To recognize gender stereotypes

**Timeframe:** 2 – 2 ½ hours

**Materials needed:** flipchart paper, colored pens or markers

**Ideal workspace:** All participants must be able to see the flip chart. For Part B, enough table or floor space is needed for groups of 4-5 people to draw large pictures.

**Number of participants:** 10-25; preferably similar numbers of men and women



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

## STEP 1

### Part A:

Ask participants to think about the first words that come to mind when they hear the words 'man' and 'woman.' Write down responses from the group in two columns on flipchart paper: 'MAN' and 'WOMAN.'

This is an example of the kind of list that participants might come up with:

MAN	
Police	Beer, wine
Father	Bread-winner
Power	Decision-maker
Strength	Violence
Freedom	Unfaithful
Businessman	Husband
<b>Penis</b>	<b>Moustache</b>
<b>Testicles</b>	<b>Beard</b>
Generous	Lazy
Selfish	Brave
Dominant	<b>Adam's apple</b>
Loud	Humorous
Noble	

WOMAN	
Cooking	Gentle
Talkative	Passive
Shopping	Kind-hearted
Mother	<b>Menstruation</b>
Wife	<b>Pregnancy</b>
<b>Breasts</b>	<b>Childbirth</b>
Gossip	Housekeeper
Sexy	Passive
Beautiful	Obedient
Tidy	<b>Vagina</b>
Jealous	Tolerant
<b>Uterus</b>	Doesn't drink heavily or smoke



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

“I work with local women. They have more difficult living conditions than me. so if I can't convince my own family [about gender equity], how can they convince their families?”

staff member,  
CARE Vietnam

Make sure that, at a minimum, some words describing biological traits (such as 'penis' for man and 'breast' or 'menstruation' for woman) come up on the list. Biological components are bolded in the list above.

When the lists are complete, ask participants if any of the roles can be reversed. Can any of the 'man' words also describe women? Can any of the 'woman' words also describe men? What are the things that women or men can do exclusively?

Can woman be a police officer? A husband? A parent? Powerful? Free? Strong? Humorous? Generous? Bread-winner? Noble? Unfaithful? Can women drink? Can a woman have a penis? If women are capable of being a police officer (for example), why aren't there more women who are police officers?

Can a man cook? Do shopping? Be gentle? Submissive? Beautiful? Have breasts? Gossip? Be warm, kind-hearted? Menstruate? Be sexy? Be a wife? Can a man be fair? Be passive? Tolerant? Obedient? If men are capable of cooking and shopping, why don't more men do the cooking and shopping for their households? Why do some men who have jobs as cooks not do the cooking for their families?

Explain that these lists illustrate the difference between sex and gender. Refer to the World Health Organization's (WHO) working definitions for sex and gender: Sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male. Gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female at a particular point in time.

“I have changed in a positive way. I used to be very bossy. I used to look down on women, even my mother, but now I have more appreciation towards [women].”

male staff member,  
CARE Vietnam

“Actually, my wife is always confined to the four walls of the house. I used to feel that every woman does this for the family. But I took a decision... I would look after the house the whole day today. After doing that, I realized that I did not get even five minutes of break.”

man, India

“It is not that men are horrible, but that they are in the same gender role trap.”

woman



M.Prvulović/CARE

Part B:

Divide participants into single-sex groups of 4-5 people.

Ask the groups to work together to illustrate what they understand to be an ideal man and an ideal woman, using large sheets of paper and markers.

Alternatively, if supplies are available, participants can use modeling clay, or cloth, or balloons, wires, pencils, and other materials to build a sculpture.

Depending on time available and the number of participants, you can ask each group to draw two pictures (one man and one woman), or only one picture.

When they have finished, ask each group to present and explain their drawing(s) to the group.

These are some reactions of participants after completing this activity.

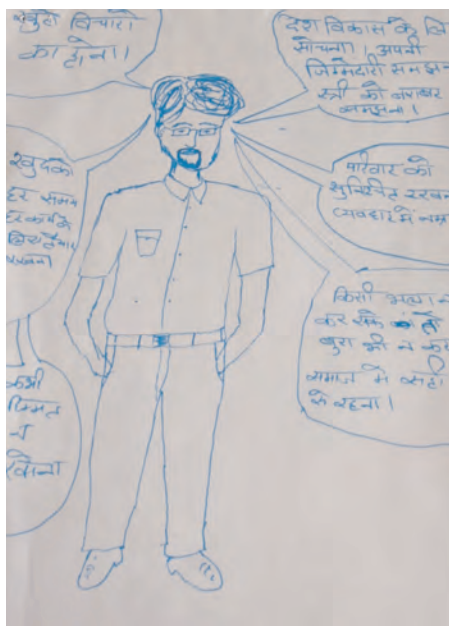
“By drawing an image of the ideal man, we realized that men also endure pressure and bear a different kind of discrimination by reinforcing gender inequalities.”  
(women)

“We men feel a burden to impress girls, earn an adequate salary and develop a muscular body.” (men)

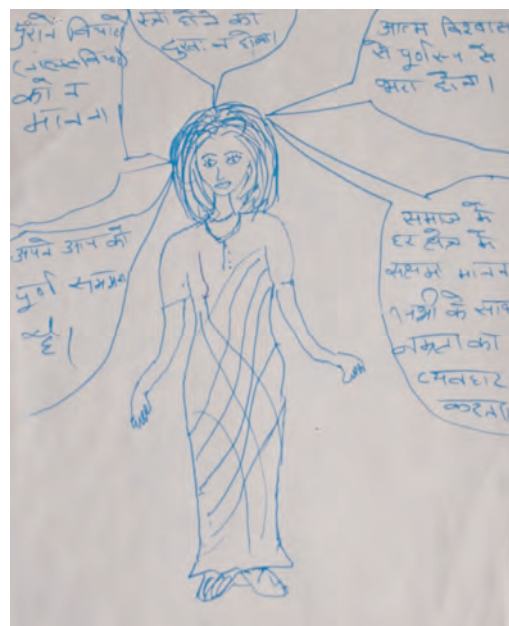
“I can’t grow a mustache, and my father and uncle always pester me about it. I’m not considered [much of a man] without one.” (man, India)

“It is so difficult to live up to the expectations of the ideal woman.” (woman, Balkans)

“I feel enormous pressure to support my family financially. My dream was to return to school to get an advanced degree, but I had to give it up in order to fulfill my obligations.” (man, Balkan)



Sarah Kambou/ICRW



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

## STEP 2: Discussion

Initiate a discussion with the group using some or all of these questions as a starting point; ask additional probing questions as appropriate. Encourage debate within the group, and be ready to spend some time discussing the issues that arise.

Some sample answers are included beneath some of the questions, to give you an idea of where the questions are headed. These are participant responses from a similar exercise that was done in the Republic of Georgia in 2006.

- What did you learn about being a boy or girl when you were growing up? How did you learn? From whom?

*A newborn baby's sex is acknowledged when it is born when its genitals are recognized. Penis and testicles means it is a boy; vagina means it is a girl.*

*On identifying the biological sex of the child, the family knows how to bring her/him up. There are differences in the colors used for boys and girls (blue/pink), types of clothes (trousers/dresses), types of toys etc. Social norms are set by each culture.*

*A person's biological sex dictates the way they will be brought up.*

*Boys are brought up to be independent, aggressive, tough, courageous, physically strong; girls are brought up to be dependent, emotional, sensitive, delicate.*

- How are images of the ideal man and woman created? Where do they come from? Who affirms them? Would you like to change the images you describe?

*The attitudes, values and behavior that as men we consider appropriate for us (our gender identity or masculinity) are learned in society.*

*Men can also be dependent and sensitive; women can be strong and independent. Society puts different values on these attributes for men and women.*

*More social value is placed on a newly born boy child than a girl child.*

*In the Republic of Georgia, the facilitator asked why none of the groups had included a penis and testicles in their models of an ideal man (see models shown on next page). Participants replied that it wasn't necessary since they were underneath the clothing. This pointed to some nervousness and timidity with regards to exposing genital organs. The facilitator explained that in other countries when this exercise was carried out it was quite common for the groups to include penises and testicles and there would be discussion around the size of them; some arguing that the bigger they are the more of a man you are. This was acknowledged by some of the participants as being an issue for Georgian men too.*

- What are the things that women or men can do exclusively? (This question is deliberately open ended. Participants may come up with answers that reflect biological or cultural differences.)
- What is a gender stereotype? Are gender stereotypes positive, negative, or neutral? Why do gender stereotypes persist? What is the purpose of challenging gender stereotypes? Why do some people resist challenging the status quo?
- How easy or difficult is it to consider gender roles that are different from the ones we are accustomed to? What does this mean in the context of our development work? What happens if we challenge these roles? What happens if we do not challenge these roles?

“We used to believe that a good girl was someone who stayed home and was sweet. Now we believe that standing on your feet is a good thing.”

young woman, India

“I have learned so much... I have been thinking and thinking of what was discussed and am able to see how discrimination happens between men and women.”

Balkans

“There is no difference between men and women except for reproductive functions, but there is social pressure to conform to particular roles. Both men and women are losing.”

man





J. Rosenzweig/CARE

### STEP 3: Closing

Congratulate participants on their contributions, and encourage them to become more aware of gender roles and expectations in their daily lives.

Ask participants: How do the concepts in this exercise relate to your work? How will your work change as a result of your new knowledge?

Provide pieces of paper to each participant and invite them to write how their understanding of gender has changed after this exercise. Also ask them to write one action or change in their life they will take this week as a result of participating in this exercise. No one is asked to write their name on the paper, so it is anonymous. Anyone can volunteer their thoughts on what they wrote out loud with the group, after everyone is finished.

### Notes to the Facilitator

This exercise explores what it means to be male or female in the participants' culture. It also challenges participants to think of gender as something that is constantly changing and that can improve over time.

**Often, 'gender' and 'sex' are understood to be the one and the same. In reality, they are quite different.** There is a difference between what our bodies are physically able to do, such as producing sperm or giving birth, and what our society expects us to do.

Sex is determined by our bodies: a person is either male or female from before the moment he or she is born. Gender, on the other hand, is socially defined. Gender depends on historic, economic and cultural forces, and by definition is constantly changing. This means that people have different understandings of what gender is, depending on their context. People learn about what it means to be male or female from many places, including from their families, communities, social institutions, schools, religion and media.

The result of **traditional gender roles** is often that people are not able to reach their full potential. Both men and women would benefit from a perspective that does not limit what people can and cannot do. To **stereotype** is to categorize individuals or groups according to an oversimplified standardized image or idea.

For example, in many cultures, education for girls and women is given a lower priority than for boys and men. However, according to UNICEF, girls denied an education are more vulnerable to poverty, violence, abuse, dying in childbirth and at risk of diseases including HIV/AIDS (State of the World's Children 2004, press release).

As another example, in many cultures, men are expected to display traditional traits of masculinity. This can often result in sexual promiscuity, heavy alcohol consumption, or violence, all of which are unhealthy behaviors, both for men and their families.

All people can be 'feminine' in some ways, and 'masculine' in other ways. There is a diversity of masculinities and femininities that exist beyond the narrow gender models they are familiar with. **There is no one way to be a man or be a woman.** Our goal is to promote a flexible and tolerant attitude toward gender, rather than reinforcing rigid roles and expectations.

**Gender is hierarchical;** in most societies, it gives more power to men than to women. Also, it preserves the existing power structure. Work that women do revolves around the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of other people, especially their husbands/partners and children. Work that men do is related to their role as bread winners/providers for their families, which leads them to seek out paid work. For example, many women love to cook, and many women cook better than men. Then why is it that mostly men are cooks at hotels and restaurants while women cook at home, unpaid?

We have found that it works well to **emphasize improving women's agency and autonomy, but not to the exclusion of men.** Working with men has shown us that if we work together to promote a wider definition of gender for both men and women – thus reducing discrimination and stereotypes for men and women who don't exactly fit the "norm" – everyone can be empowered. We need to keep working hard to find ways to reduce discrimination and allow more people equal choices and chances.

Often, society defines what is right for men and women. It is not our fault that the system is that way. However, **when we recognize that there is injustice, we can do something to change it.** Society is made up of people, and people are capable of change. This is a very personal process. First we have to recognize what is happening in our own lives, and then we can begin to make changes.

Most of us feel that culture, religion, tradition, and social norms dictate gender roles. But where does change happen if not in our individual circumstances? How does a fashion trend start if not by one or two people one day starting to wear or do a certain thing? Ideas about gender affect us both privately and publicly; that means we have the opportunity to make changes at both the personal level, as well as in society.

"I am different now, more confident. I don't accept roles just because I'm a woman. I know this is difficult in my society, since Vietnamese men are not interested in such independent women. But now I can't go back to the old way."

woman, Vietnam

"HIV-infected men seem to have as much difficulty with social contact and relationships as women. Women do not dare to expose themselves to other people and the community. So I have come up with different approaches to work with these different groups."

Vietnam