

# Gender Roles Activity

**Recommended Age: 12+**

## Goals

- To discuss gender roles and stereotypes.
- To illustrate how gender stereotypes can lead to unhealthy relationships and contribute to violence against women, girls, and non-binary people.
- To broaden the concept of what gender and gender expression can be.
- To challenge the limitations and discrimination created by gender scripts.

## Have Ready

- Write on flipchart/whiteboard: Gender Roles (stereotypes) with the subheadings Man and Woman in columns.
- Two sticky notes per youth and pens.

## Activity Introduction

- Tell youth, **“Let’s start by breaking down the idea of gender roles. Unfortunately, we live in a society that often only recognizes two genders: men and women. That’s called a gender binary.”** A binary is a system that only has two options. A role is something that you play. Just like characters in a show or movie, gender roles or scripts tell us how we are supposed to act as ‘males’ and ‘females.’ Gender roles are based primarily on stereotypes, which are taught to us by media and society around us.
- **We know that, in reality, there are many ways to express our genders and it goes way beyond female and male.** The issues that we will be talking about around unhealthy relationships and abuse often stem from the binary and the way that we’re taught to fit into specific gender roles. That’s why we will be starting our discussion by talking about ‘male’ and ‘female’ gender roles.

## Instructions

- Ask youth, **“How are boys or men expected to be and act like in the world? What are the messages they get?”** Have youth write a response on a sticky note and stick it on the board.

## Sample Flipchart

### Gender Roles (Stereotypes)

#### Man

- Be strong
- Don't cry
- Don't show emotions, except anger (even when sad)
- Want sex all the time
- Be aggressive
- Do physical job
- Be the boss
- Be rich/successful
- Dominate situations
- **“If he does show emotions, what does he sometimes get called?”** Weak or effeminate. These words can be harmful and are often homophobic and sexist. When guys get called names for showing emotions, it can make people hide those feelings or feel ashamed for having feelings.
- **“How are girls or women expected to be and act in the world? What are the messages they get?”** Have youth write a response on a sticky note and stick it on the board. Examples may include:

### Gender Roles (Stereotypes)

#### Woman

- Weak
- Over-emotional
- Care for and nurture others
- Serve others
- Don't voice opinions
- Not supposed to want sex
- Cry a lot
- Expected to be passive communicators

- Expected to be a ‘good girl’ or ‘nice’
- Ask youth, **“If she does act assertively, what is she called?”**  
Bossy or a bitch. Again, these words can be harmful, and are often homophobic and sexist.
- **Why are gender roles unhelpful or even harmful?** There is a lot of pressure put on everyone to buy into gender roles. And we are often put down and discriminated against if we do not fit into these gender roles/scripts, like if a woman voices her opinion, a man shows his emotions, etc. **Gender roles do not help us meet our needs, because they limit us to playing a role instead of being who we are. The roles represent only two extremes of gender, when in reality someone could be anywhere in between or identify outside of the gender binary altogether and be excluded. Regardless of the gender of people in a relationship, there can be power imbalances because of different stereotypes like masculine/feminine, aggressive/passive, etc.**
- **We can see in this example that everyone loses out.** It hurts all of us because it can make it harder for us to communicate respectfully and honestly within our relationships. Men/guys have a harder time speaking about their fears and are taught to communicate aggressively to fit the male gender role. Women/girls are told that their voices don’t matter and that they should put other people ahead of themselves. Anyone who doesn’t identify with those labels is invisible.
- **This often leads to unhealthy or even abusive relationships. When we are discussing relationships, we can see how these gender roles can lead to violence against women, girls, and non-binary people.**
- **What could it be like if everyone was encouraged to use healthy communication in a relationship?** (Would folks feel scared of their partner? Would they feel safe to say what they felt? Would they be listening to each other?)
  - Healthy, respectful communication.
  - Respectful conflict, where people feel heard and not threatened.
  - People feel good and respect relationship boundaries.
  - Feel safe with one another and comfortable being vulnerable.

- Both partners can share their emotions in a calm and respectful way.
  - No abuse.
- **When we challenge gender roles, it gives us more power to say what we really want for ourselves. We can also figure out ways to communicate and negotiate our sexual boundaries and desires in a respectful way.**