

## Gender: a brief overview

### Sex and gender

Sex refers to biological, anatomical and physiological characteristics that define males and females.

- ❑ *Gender* refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes, which society considers appropriate and expected for men and women. It includes the social organization of women's and men's lives and relations.
- ❑ *Masculinity* refers to the meanings and expressions given to being male and the social organization of men's lives and relations, while *femininity* refers to those of women.

### Gender is socially constructed

Patterns of gender – of women's and men's lives and relations – are the outcome of social forces and relations. In other words, they are constructed in and through society. Gender is constructed by a wide range of social forces and dynamics, including children's relations with peers and adults, the media, schooling, sociocultural norms, and the workings of organizations and governments.

### Gender is both personal and collective

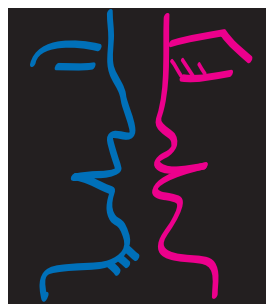
- ❑ *Gender exists at multiple levels*, from personal identity and personality, to social and intimate relationships, to norms, values and culture, to organizations and social institutions, and to policy frameworks.
- ❑ *Gender has both personal and collective dimensions*. At the personal level, men and women 'do' or 'perform' gender through their identities, behaviour and relations. Individuals construct, enact and negotiate a gendered sense of self over time in different social contexts and relations. However, women's and men's conduct is shaped by wider social constraints and power relations. At the collective level, gender is defined and sustained in communities, institutions and culture through such collective forces as policies and laws, and through local and global economic, military and cultural dynamics.

### Gender involves power and inequality

- ❑ *Gender relations in many contexts are relations of inequality and injustice*. There is a widespread pattern of male privilege and female disadvantage. They exist in which men, as a group, enjoy institutional privileges at the expense of women, as a group.
- ❑ *Gender inequalities are interpersonal*. They exist in men's and women's daily interactions and relations in households, workplaces and public places. Gender inequalities also are *institutional*, shaping women's and men's access to political, economic and cultural power.
- ❑ Gendered power relations are dynamic (they can change over time) and contested (they are challenged – and defended – by individuals, movements, organizations and governments).

### There is diversity and hierarchy

- ❑ *There are multiple femininities and masculinities*. They exist across different cultures, periods of history, and communities and settings within any one society. However, some constructions of gender are dominant while others are subordinate. Some forms of masculinity and femininity are given social status and legitimacy – praised by others, celebrated in the media, and granted more rights – while others are marginalized, punished and, sometimes, criminalized.
- ❑ Gender interacts with other social divisions and forms of diversity, such as those associated with race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, nationality and disability.



# **Policy approaches to engaging men and boys**

**in achieving  
gender equality  
and health equity**



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