



## BACKGROUND NOTES: BOYS AND GIRLS

Each person is born with either a girl's body or a boy's body. These physical differences determine a person's sex. Sex is the physical characteristics that identify a person as a male or a female:

- Type of genital organs (penis, testicles, vagina, womb)
- Type of predominant hormones circulating in the body
- Ability to produce sperm or eggs
- Ability to give birth and breastfeed children

Gender describes the ideas and expectations people have about men and women. These include ideas about what qualities and abilities are considered feminine and masculine and expectations about how men and women should behave in different situations. A person's gender is complicated, and is made up of roles, duties, appearance, speech, movement, and more. Ideas about gender are learned from family, friends, teachers, religious leaders, advertisements, the media, and opinion leaders.

### What are gender roles?

Gender roles are the kinds of activities that are considered appropriate for individuals based on their sex. A person's gender role refers to the way a community defines what it is to be a female or a male. Each community expects women and men to think, feel and act in a certain way, simply because they are women or men. In most communities, for example, women are expected to fetch water and fuel, prepare food and care for their children and husband. Men are often expected to work outside the home to provide for their families and parents in old age and to defend their families from harm. Unlike the physical differences between men and women, communities create gender roles, and the ideas and expectations associated with them. These roles are different depending on a community's traditions, laws, and religions.



## How gender roles are learned

Gender roles are passed down from parents to children, as well as learned from other family members and community members. From the time we are very young, parents treat girls and boys differently – sometimes without even realizing they do so. As children grow up, they accept these roles because they want to please their parents and because parents have more authority. These roles help children know who they are and what is expected of them. So in the same way that children learn their own names, they also learn about their gender and what it means to be a woman or a man in their community.

As the world changes, gender roles also change. Many young people want to live differently from their parents. But they sometimes find it difficult to change, because the family and community expect them to continue following old rules. As women struggle to gain the freedom to redefine their gender roles, they can also gain more control over other parts of their lives.