BACKGROUND NOTES: LISTENING TO EACH OTHER, GENDER STEREOTYPES

WHEN GENDER ROLES CAUSE HARM

Every culture has expectations of how men and women should act and what their roles are in society. Fulfilling the roles expected by the community can be satisfying and can give women a sense of belonging. But these roles can also limit a woman's activities and choices, and make her feel less valued than a man. When this happens, everyone (the woman, her family, and her community) suffers. In most communities, women are expected to be wives and mothers. Many women like this role because it can be very satisfying and it gives them status in the community. Some women would prefer to follow other interests, or they want to have only a few children, but their families and communities do not give them this choice. If she is expected to have many children, a woman may have less chance to learn new skills or go to school. Most of her time and energy will be spent taking care of others' needs. Or, if a woman is unable to have children, her community may value her less than other women. Most communities value men's work more than woman's work. For example, if a woman has worked all day, and then cooks, cleans and cares for her children at night. But because her husband's work is considered more important, she is concerned about his rest and not her own. In this scenario, her children will grow up thinking men's work is more important, and value women's work and contributions less.

Women are often considered more emotional than men, and are free to express these emotions with others. Men, however, are often taught that showing emotions like sadness or tenderness is unmanly, so they hide their feelings. Or they express their feelings in angry or violent ways that are more acceptable to men. When men are unable to show their feelings, children may feel more distant from their fathers, and men are less able to get support from others for their problems. Women are often discouraged from speaking at or forbidden to attend community meetings. This means the community only hears about what men think. Since women also have knowledge and experiences to share, the whole community suffers when they cannot discuss problems and offer suggestions.

Gender Stereotypes

A stereotype is an oversimplified or biased description of a group. Stereotypes are often negative and harmful. Gender stereotypes are generally used to describe the abilities of men versus those of women in the community in an oversimplified way. Stereotypes are often recognized as being illogical even though many people still believe them.