



IT'S TIME ... TO TALK ABOUT IT! CONNECT. RESPECT. PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

## It's time ... talk about gender norms.

Sexual violence is an issue that affects everyone in a community. Understanding gender norms and their impact on sexuality can help to create a society free from sexual violence. This fact sheet will provide information and resources on gender norms.

### What are gender norms?

Gender norms are a set of "rules" or ideas about how each gender should behave. They are not based in biology, but instead determined by a culture or society. For example, women are not better than men at doing housework, but often they are expected to perform those tasks. It is important to remember that gender norms can be very different from one culture to another. What may be acceptable behavior for a male in one culture may be unacceptable in another.

### What do gender norms have to do with sexuality?

For most people, being treated a certain way because of one's gender begins at a young age. For example, think about the different toys for boys and girls. Oftentimes, girls play with dolls, while boys play with action figures. This is an example of early gender norms. As children age, they are taught what it means to act "female" or "male" in a culture. This strongly influences behaviors in relationships and sexuality. Some ways that gender norms impact sexuality:

**Communication style.** Women and men are often taught different styles of communication. Women may be taught to express more emotions or to communicate passively. Men may be taught to keep their emotions bottled up. This can create conflict and confusion.

**Body image and self-esteem.** Gender norms tell us the way women and men "should" look. Too often representations are unrealistic and unhealthy. Feeling unhappy with our bodies can impact how we behave sexually and how we feel about sex.

**How one views sex.** Gender norms can include "double standards." A "double standard" means something is OK for one gender but not the other. For example, it is OK for men to be highly sexual, but women should be reserved. This supports the idea that men are always seeking sex, while women are less interested in sex.

**How one behaves sexually.** Often, males are taught to be aggressive, while women are taught to set limits when it comes to sex. This can be a contributing factor in sexual violence (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011).

**Sexual risk-taking.** Research shows that those who adhere to stricter gender norms are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior including unsafe sex (Noar & Morokoff, 2002). This means that following strict gender norms may actually impact an individual's health and safety.

**Bullying and harassment.** Strict gender norms influence bullying and harassment. Often, bullying is focused on sexual orientation and gender expression (GLSEN, 2005). Those who identify as, or are perceived as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) are harassed and mistreated for not fitting into the norm.



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## Healthier, less restrictive gender norms can create healthier sexual interactions.

There are many examples of how gender norms impact sexuality, but how could healthier, less-restrictive gender norms actually help create healthier sexual interactions?

**Improve communication.** Less restrictive gender norms would allow for individuals to express themselves more freely and assertively. Communication in relationships and sexual interactions would likely improve.

**Improve body image and self-esteem.** Gender norms that allow for various body types and ideas of attractiveness would allow individuals to feel good about themselves and how they look.

**Eliminate double standards.** Less restrictive gender norms would allow for a fair and equal view of sexuality, not one that is split by gender. Women would be free to enjoy their sexuality just like men.

**Provide balance and respectful sexual behavior.** It is important that all genders behave in a way that respects the rights of others. Behavior should be assertive, not aggressive.

**Lessen sexual risks.** If all genders are taught to be assertive and communicate around issues of sexuality and sexual health, the result is likely to be more sexual interactions that are safe and consensual.

**Support LGBTQ individuals.** If gender norms were less limiting, bullying would likely decrease. Everyone deserves the freedom to be who they are and be treated with respect.

## Facts

- Females are more likely than males to be victims of sexual violence. One in six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed sexual assault compared to one in 33 men. (CDC, 2011).
- The three most common reasons students are bullied in schools relate to gender norms.

The reasons, students are bullied, are because of physical appearance, actual or perceived sexual orientation or how they express their gender identity (GLSEN, 2005).

## Resources

- **American Medical Student Association's Gender and sexuality resources**  
[www.amsa.org/AMSA/Homepage/About/Committees/GenderandSexuality.aspx](http://www.amsa.org/AMSA/Homepage/About/Committees/GenderandSexuality.aspx)
- **Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network**  
[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)
- **Population Council's *It's all one* curriculum**  
[http://www.popcouncil.org/publications/books/2010\\_ItsAllOne.asp](http://www.popcouncil.org/publications/books/2010_ItsAllOne.asp)
- **TrueChild** [www.truechild.org](http://www.truechild.org)

## References

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## Scenario and discussion points: Related to bullying

Gender norms impact everyone. Here are discussion questions and important points to consider.

**Jake (16), Aiden (17) and Darryl (16)**

Recently, Jake transferred to a new high school and has been having a hard time adjusting. At his last school, he was popular but that hasn't been the case at his new school. Kids seem to avoid him. He doesn't have many friends. When he first started at the new school, someone started a rumor that Jake is gay.

Aiden and Darryl are in classes with Jake and constantly bother him. They always say things to imply that Jake is gay, such as "Jake and his boyfriend," or "You're for gay marriage, right?" It's relentless and is really starting to bother Jake. He's starting to avoid school and feels depressed

## Discussion questions

1. What can be done to help Jake? Who might be able to intervene? What could they do?
2. What could be done to address the bullying by Aiden and Darryl?
3. Bullying because of perceived sexual orientation is common. Why do you think this might be?

## Discussion points

- There are many individuals who could intervene to help support Jake including other students, teachers and Jake's parents. Other students can rally around Jake and help him to feel supported and accepted. Jake's teachers can listen to his concerns and make sure he is linked to proper support systems within the school. Jake's parents can provide him with a home where he is free to express himself and be accepted.
- There are several individuals who could intervene and address Aiden and Darryl's behavior including other students, teachers and parents. Other students can stand up to Aiden and Darryl and let them know their behavior is not acceptable. Teachers can hold Aiden and Darryl accountable for their bullying. Parents can urge the school to adopt policies to help keep students safe.
- When individuals are bullied because of perceived sexual orientation, often it is because someone doesn't follow strict gender norms. In other words, if someone doesn't follow gender norms the assumption is made that it is because of their sexual orientation. In reality, the way a person expresses gender in their dress, style and behavior may have very little to do with their sexual orientation.

## Moving Forward

Interested in doing more? Here are some suggestions for what individuals can do to get involved:

- The scenario above focused on bullying based on perceived sexual orientation. Think about the ways in which cultural norms support this kind of behavior. When you hear someone using gender norms to limit or bully another person, speak up. Remind others that gender norms are social "rules" not real limitations.
- Educate others about gender norms and double standards. Look for examples in the media and use them as teachable moments to bring the topic up with others.
- Advocate for school, workplace and community environments that reject sexism and bullying. Help create environments where individuals are free to safely be who they are.