Gender: A Social Construct  
Session with adolescents in Gautampuri and Gurgaon

‘Jab ladke aur ladkiya mea koi farak hi nahi hai, toh phir itna bhedbhaav kyun hota hai? Sabko ek samaan treat karna chahiye’ (If there is no difference between boys and girls, then why is there so much of discrimination amongst them? Everyone should be treated equally.)

Adolescents from Gautampuri and Gurugram participated in a session which focused on introducing the term ‘gender’ to a group unfamiliar with the concept and to identify and understand the difference between sex and gender. The objective of the activity was to deeply reflect upon sex and the preconceived notions regarding gender. The session followed participatory methodology and was conducted in the form of a game followed by a plenary discussion. The participants were divided into two groups, where they had to write about the certain tasks, trait, role, characteristic or adjective that describes the word that has been assigned to their group which was - Male/ Boy and Female/ Girl.

Highlights from the Session

Gautampuri

Date: 6th June, 2022  
Number of participants: 21 adolescents (3 boys and 18 girls),  
Resource Persons: Programme Staff, Martha Farrell Foundation  
Field Facilitators: Nidhi

Martha Farrell Foundation programme staff first provided a brief overview of how the game was to be played. The participants were encouraged to note down whatever comes to their mind when they think of the terms Males/Boys and Females/ Girls. The participants in Gautampuri wrote down various things. Their responses have been noted down below in Box 1.

| Box 1- Responses on adolescents’ of Gautampuri where they highlighted about- |
|---|---|
| **Girls/Females** | **Boys/Males** |
| ● Girls love long hair | ● Boys don’t cry easily and do not cry at all |
| ● Favourite colour- Pink colour | ● Boys like rings |
| ● Girls wear headbands | ● Boys can roam around according to their wishes and choices |
| ● Love wearing top and jeans | ● There is discrimination amongst boys and girls |
| ● Girls are beautiful | ● Boys are very strong and powerful |
| ● Their favourite thing is fur | ● Boys like cars |
| ● Girls can do any work | ● Boys can roam around in the night without feeling unsafe |
| ● Girls like wearing suits |   |
| ● Girls are not scared of working hard |   |
| ● Girls take a lot of time to get ready |   |
| ● Girls have a soft voice |   |
- Childbirth
- Girls and women do all the household work
- Girls are not allowed to be friends with boys
- They love to do makeup, *makeup mea bahut dhyaan lagaati hai* (focus a lot on putting on makeup)
- Girls and women get periods
- Girls are very sober
- They wear nose pins.

- Boys get ready quickly
- Boys love sports
- Boys cannot become mothers
- *’apni marzi ke maalik’* (Master of their own accord)
- Boys do not get periods.

Adolescents note down their responses about Males/Boys and Females/Girls during the game-based activity.

After playing the game, a discussion was held with the participants about whether the terms **Boys/ Males** could be exchanged with **Girls and Females** and vice versa. The participants responded quickly saying that they could be exchanged but not all the words written on the board could be used for each other. Through a participatory discussion, the participants highlighted various things which could not be exchanged. For instance - that men and boys do not wear salwar kameez (an Indian attire, usually worn by women/girls in India) or nose pins or they cannot give birth to a child. That less men keep long hair or like the colour pink.
A key point of discussion was gender stereotypes, after which the facilitator presented some examples of men wearing nose pins and salwar kameez which led to a larger discussion about Gender and Sex. The facilitator pointed out various things like childbirth, periods, penis, vagina, breasts, Adam’s apple are sex and the rest of the things are gender. A broad discussion about how gender is a social construct and that it is socialised into us since birth was done. By this time, it was apparent to the participants that there are certain biological and physical differences between males and females and the rest is gender which happens through the socialisation process.

The participants discussed all the words again which they had written on the board pointing out whether those words were Gender or Sex. They pointed out the various gendered things like short hair, sports, courageous etc came to their mind for men and things like taking care of household work, beautiful, salwar kameez etc came to their mind for women, because they have seen it in the society more often than the other. The participants were a bit apprehensive in speaking the word sex and said ‘praakirtik ling’ instead of saying sex. To make the participants comfortable about the term sex, the facilitator discussed the example of forms (exam forms) where there is a section to fill their sex.

The participants quickly agreed and this example made them feel quite comfortable, as they could relate the word sex to the forms and hence they could relate it with males and females. An understanding was built amongst the participants about Gender and Sex and to reinforce their learnings, they watched a video where a discussion in detail about how gender has been so strongly conditioned into us, that certain roles are associated with males and some with females were presented. The video helped them strengthen their learnings from the previous session.
After watching the video the participants held a conversation about the discrimination that happens amongst boys and girls of the community. Priya said, ‘Jab ladke aur ladkiya mea koi farak hi nahi hai, toh phir itna bhedbhaav kyun hota hai? Sabko ek samaan treat karna chahiye’ (If there is no difference between boys and girls, then why is there so much of discrimination amongst them? Everyone should be treated equally.) This led to a conversation amongst the participants that because of society, some gender has power over the other and that is happening because of socialisation. The activity helped the participants deconstruct the notions of gender and how to disassociate any tasks, adjectives, looks etc. from gender. The participants understood the terms Sex and Gender, also did not feel shy in saying the word sex by the end of the conversation.
The session started on a very enthusiastic note, since all the adolescents had already gathered before the facilitator arrived. The adolescents seemed very excited for the session and were constantly asking, ‘what they were going to learn today’? The facilitator then asked the participants to stand in two groups and one group would be named males and the other females. The participants, after listening to this, stood in two separate sex groups. The facilitator firmly said, two groups would be ‘named’ as males and females, and not that she asked them to stand in two separate sex groups. The adolescents laughed it off and quickly stood in two mixed groups. They wrote about what comes to their mind when they think about males and females.

The participants wrote down many things like boys have shorter hair and girls are more mature than boys. The participants even mentioned that girls like to fight more than boys and wrote ‘zyaada jhagadit hai’. During the discussion the participants discussed that girls are more argumentative and pick up fights on purpose and associated things like makeup, bubbly nature, childlike behaviour with girls whereas when they discussed about Males/Boys, things like firm, balanced, speaking less, aggressive came up during the conversation. Upon discussing further many such stereotypes surfaced during the
conversation, after which the facilitator exchanged Males/Boys with Females/ Girls and vice versa. The participants got really uncomfortable and were negating the facilitator telling her that this cannot be done. They pointed out that only a few of the adjectives written on the board for females can be used for males and similarly only some adjectives about males can be used for females. They pointed out that males do not apply make-up, wear suits, have long hair and females are less aggressive, apply make-up, laugh more than boys, have childlike behaviour and are immature. The facilitator then presented some examples to the adolescents where they were shown videos of boys applying make-up, wearing suits etc. A female participant Yasmin said - *Mujhe toh bahut gussa aata hai. Par kyunki mai ladki isliye humesha bola jaata hai ki mai zyaada gussa na karu aur apne guess ko dabaun* (I get very angry, but since I am a female, I am always asked to hide my anger and suppress it.) She then discussed with the rest of the participants that being aggressive has anything to do with males or females. The discussion led towards the participants sharing their own examples about whether what was written on the board is true for them or not. Jyoti pointed out that she feels she is very mature and understands things very deeply. To add to the discussion, things like childbirth were discussed where the participants were asked if a man can get pregnant. (A discussion was held with the participants about how all the news shared on whatsapp is not always correct information and that the adolescents should not trust all the information without checking the sources.)

Most of the participants denied, after which one of them shared that she had seen a news article where she read on whatsapp about a man getting pregnant. So a discussion was held with the participants, if an assigned male at birth can give birth to children. The facilitator then raised a question about, how long does it take for a baby to be born? The adolescents answered by saying that it takes the boy child 7 months and girl child 9 months and various varied answers according to the child’s sexes.

The facilitator then led a discussion about how long it takes for a baby to be born, i.e. 9 months. Then the concept of sex and gender was introduced to the group where a discussion was led about how if people are born either male or female with certain organs that determine their sex. Whereas gender is a social construct. Things like wearings suits and nose pins, courageous, aggressive, childlike is something that any of the sex can do, but we often assign certain things with certain gender. A discussion was led in detail about who feels they are very aggressive, a lot of the boys and girls raised their hands, to which the facilitator added a follow-up question, if they think it has anything to do with them being a boy or a girl. If girls are less aggressive? The adolescents had a conversation that they all get angry equally, but girls are asked to hide their anger. And by the end of the conversation they were aware that most of the things they had written on the board has nothing to do with them being a boy or a girl, but it has to do with gender, which they have been socialised into.
Key Learnings

- An important insight that became apparent through the activity is that the misinformation and news on whatsapp impacts adolescents deeply, leading to sharing wrong information.
- The adolescents could create the link of sex by the example of forms, which made them comfortable in saying ‘sex’ and understanding the biological differences between males and females.
- Many adolescents in Gautampuri reflected upon gender and sex very deeply and pointed out during the conversations, that if there are just biological differences then why is there so much of discrimination that happens.
- The widespread nature of gender based understanding of males and females and the interlinkages between these became apparent through this session, as participants wrote many gendered things. They pointed out that only mothers can take care of babies and not fathers because fathers are not the best caregivers and cannot show love like mothers.
- The Participatory methodology of the activity was useful in helping the participants reflect deeply on their notions and talk about their experiences of gender.
- One of the key observations was that the adolescents from Gurugram were not aware about the childbirth process and how long it takes for the baby to be born. It was discussed with them during the session, but a deeper reflection was that the schools are not creating the kind of knowledge which should be there amongst the adolescents.

Next Steps

Now that adolescents have understood the difference between Gender and Sex and even realised how gender has been created by the society for both males and females, the next step is to strengthen the learnings and create an understanding about the basic concepts of gender, socialisation and how it affects their lives.