

Info sheet

Gender Roles

WHAT ARE GENDER ROLES?

Gender refers to e.g. the division into man and woman. But the term gender roles reveals that the topic is actually far more complex: In addition to biological differences, there are also social ones. There is also the factor of who finds whom attractive.

SOCIAL ROLES

There are also roles in connection with the genders. Social norms, moral ideas, religious stipulations and legal definitions simultaneously promote and limit personal freedom as to how to lead your life. Within a gender, this leads to a multitude of roles for how to be a woman or a man. Some people reject this division, however, and consider themselves queer. This refers to social roles that can't be described in terms of a division into men and women.

GENDER ROLES

Gender roles – and how they structure our society – are a complex issue. Many different factors interact with each other in various ways. There are also frequent reciprocal effects with other criteria, such as ethnicity/religions, social class, age, etc. A mother has a different gender role than a childless woman, for example. When speaking about gender roles, the English term “gender” is also used in the German language.

GENDER

The biological arguments seem clear: a person with XX chromosomes and the corresponding physical characteristics is a woman, and a person with XY chromosomes and the corresponding physical characteristics is a man. But there are also people born with ambiguous gender characteristics. Some cultures have a third category for these cases, the third gender. Still others in turn feel like they were born in the wrong body. They refer to themselves as transgender.

ATTRACTION

In addition to genders and social roles, the attraction to other people is an important factor. To put it simply, this is about who finds whom attractive. This attraction can change over the course of a lifetime, but it doesn't have to. Two forms create the best-known contrast: an attraction between different genders and one between the same genders, as with lesbian or gay people. Here too there are other subdivisions. Some people consider all people to be potentially attractive, others don't feel any physical attraction at all...

Action sheet A

What do you see?

DOES THIS DEPICT WOMEN OR MEN?

The collection of the Museum of Islamic Art includes a textile that shows two human figures. It comes from present-day Iran and is dated to 1039 AH/ 1630 AD. Are people depicted here women or men? Explain your opinion by describing exactly what you see. What suggests they may be women? What makes you think they could be men?



Info sheet

Velvet brocade



Object	Velvet brocade
Inventory no.	1891,71
Period	Around 1040 AH / around 1630 AD
Place	Isfahan (?), Iran
Material	Silk, cotton, silver and gold
Size	41 cm tall, 51 cm long

THE FIGURES

Two people stand across from each other, slightly bowed, each one holding a falcon. They are wearing rich garments and turbans. In the centre, a tree composed of leaf and flower shapes stretches upwards. At this point, it's difficult to assign a gender role to the people. Youths have played an important role since ancient times. But this role no longer exists as such today. The turban and falcon indicate males. The soft facial features, lack of a beard and the waist suggest feminine shapes, however. Youths were no longer children but also weren't considered men yet. Although the gender role of youths is rare today, it does make something clear: the age and living situation (single/with partner, childless/with children, etc.) are important to determine gender roles.

THE VELVET BROCADE

A brocade is a fabric woven from various materials that also includes gold and silver threads. This velvet brocade also has silk threads woven into it, which give the fabric a sculptural aspect. Brocades are therefore expensive textiles.

SIMILARITY TO PAINTING

The figures are very similar to paintings of their time. Their style resembles that of the period when the Safavids flourished (906–1149 AH/ 1501–1736 AD) and is reminiscent of paintings by the famous artist Riza 'Abbasi. The painters of that era also created designs for textiles. They were used for garments and to decorate interior rooms.

Action sheet B

What do you see?

DOES THIS DEPICT WOMEN OR MEN?

The Aleppo Room, which was decorated with many paintings, is in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art. The image below is a section of the artwork from the period around 1600 AD. Are people depicted here women or men? Explain your opinion by describing exactly what you see. What suggests they may be women? What makes you think they could be men?



Info sheet

Aleppo Room



Object **Aleppo Room, detail**
 Inventory no. I. 2862
 Period Around 1009–12 AH / 1600–1603 AD
 Place Aleppo, Syria
 Material Wood, painted and gilded
 Size 2.95 m tall, 35 m long

THE FIGURES

At this point, it's difficult to assign a definite gender role to the people. Gender roles are understood by way of external characteristics whose interpretation changes over time. Across from a person on a throne, a figure extends an arm upward. Additional people are above and below the two figures. The people with huge turbans seem to be men. This is indicated not just by the turban but also the beards. But two figures with a turban don't have beards. It gets truly difficult with the other people. They're all wearing flat head coverings. Because of the clothing, the figure with the raised arm was considered to be a woman. On closer inspection, it is hardly possible to determine the figures making the music. Only the person in the middle seems to have a moustache. The two others have no beards and offer no further clue. Especially when musicians were represented, there were often no assignments of explicit gender roles. Only in rare cases can it then be determined directly through the clothing or other characteristics.

THE ALEPPO ROOM

The wooden wall cladding (wall panelling) was decorated with lavish ornamentation, inscriptions and figurative scenes in bold colours. It was commissioned by the Christian merchant Isa ibn Butrus, who lived in Aleppo and used it as his reception room.

SIMILARITY TO PAINTING

While the ornaments and their colour selection are very similar to the Ottoman art of that period, the figurative scenes are more in a Persian style. It is possible to see references to book illumination and textile art. Nothing is known about the painter. However, some errors in the Arabic inscriptions suggest that he came from the region of present-day Iran.

Action sheet C

How do you behave?

WHAT DO YOU FEEL?

ACT OUT DIFFERENT SCENES.

You have ten minutes to prepare a role-playing game together based on the following short text.

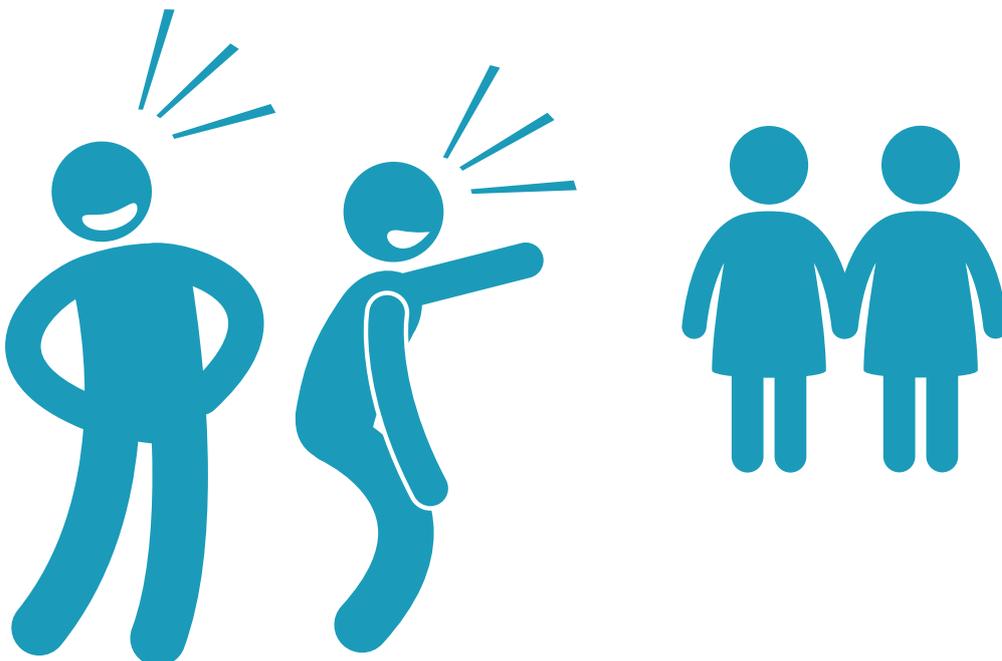
Decide who plays which role and give people names that don't appear in the group, to avoid mix-ups between real life and role play!

ROLE-PLAYING GAME #1

A girl that looks a lot like a boy was seen holding hands with another girl during a break at school. She immediately drops the other girl's hand when she sees that other students are watching her. They make fun of her when she returns to class after the break.

Persons:

- the boyish girl
- the other girl
- the schoolmates who make fun of her



Action sheet D

How do you behave?

WHAT DO YOU FEEL?

ACT OUT DIFFERENT SCENES.

You have ten minutes to prepare a role-playing game together based on the following short text.

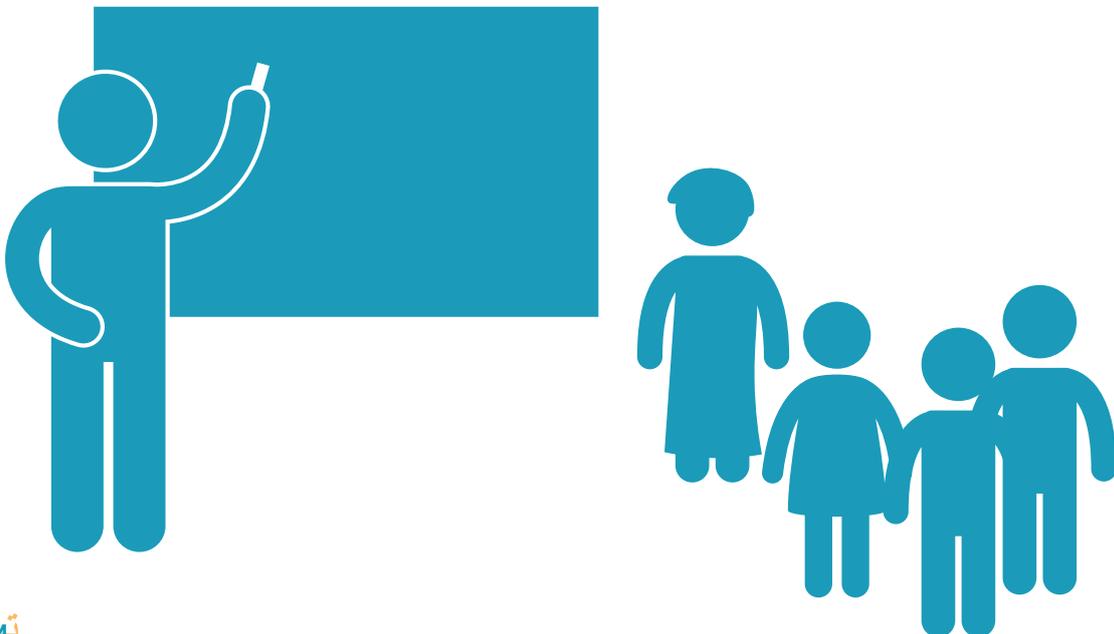
Decide who plays which role and give people names that don't appear in the group, to avoid mix-ups between real life and role play!

ROLE-PLAYING GAME #2

A new student comes to the class. He looks different to the other boys at school: he dresses differently and speaks differently. During class, a teacher comments on the boy's appearance in front of the whole group. He even tries to get the class on his side and succeeds with everyone – except for one person: one student says that everyone has the right to appear as they wish. The boy protests as well and says that his appearance has never been a problem before.

Persons:

- the student with a different appearance
- the teacher
- the giggling schoolmates
- the student who takes a dissenting view



Action sheet E

Use the following questions for discussion

Are there problems at your school / community / in your federal states for a girl because she has a boyish appearance?
Why? Or why not?

Are there problems at your school / community / in your federal states for a boy who doesn't look like the other boys?
Why? Or why not?



How should girls look and behave? Why?
How should boys look and behave? Why?
Has it always been like this?

Is it okay to insult someone because of how they look?
Why? Or why not?

How would you feel if someone insulted or hit you because of your appearance?

What can be done at school if someone is bullied because of their looks?