CHAPTER THREE
Sex, gender and stereotypes

Key issues

- Sex is a biological reality while gender refers to the socially constructed roles of women and men that differ and change in place and time.
- The gender roles constructed by society have had the effect of placing them in an inferior position to men – socially, culturally, economically, politically and in just about every other respect.
- The media, and visual images, play a key role in perpetuating gender stereotypes.
- They can also play a key role in constructing new perceptions and realities around the roles of women and men in society.

The Times of Swaziland, Sunday, December 17, 2000.

The Times of Swaziland, Sunday, January 7, 2001.

Introduction

Before we look further at how gender is dealt with in photojournalism, we need to clarify what we mean by gender and gender relations. There is increasing attention given throughout today's world to the issues of gender bias and inequality, and gender oppression. Historically, in every continent in the world – and Africa is no exception – women have been denied rights, access to financial benefits, jobs, higher positions and education.

The question of how gender is portrayed and constructed within the media has also gained currency. How do we portray the "fundamental characteristics" of our society, when they are as diverse for men and women as attitudes to family or job aspirations? What values and beliefs are we substantiating through our reporting and illustrations?

Understanding the difference between sex, the biological difference between women and men, and gender, the socially constructed roles assigned to men and women, is a critical starting point in any gender training. These terms are frequently confused. For example, arrival and departure forms at Jan Smuts airport in South Africa ask travellers what their "gender" is. This of course is wrong. The question should be: what is your sex?

Exercise: What is sex?

Brainstorm lists of what you see as "biological" and "socially-determined" characteristics for people – both men and women. Write the answers on a flipchart. In pairs or buzz groups, participants should discuss those things listed as "biological". Do any of these characteristics **by themselves** define what makes a man be called a man, or a woman be called a woman? The following questions can also be discussed:

- If this is a biological fact, does it always apply to people of that sex? Does it change over time? Do these changes affect our perception of the person's sex? For instance, boys under the age of ten rarely have facial hair; women over the age of 55 rarely menstruate or breast-feed babies.

- Does having this particular biological characteristic make you clearly a man or a woman? Is this something that is defined by your culture? (For instance, in many cultures a "girl-child" becomes a woman only when she menstruates; a boy may become a man when he gets a beard.)

- To what extent does this "biological fact" determine how a person looks or behaves? (For instance: it is a biological fact that most women over puberty have larger breasts than most men. However, some men choose to wear "falsies" to be attractive to other men; some women also boost the appearance of their breasts with padded bras or with silicone injections.)

- Do or can people find ways to change this "biological fact"? Consider the range of physical/medical acts that intervene or alter these biological "givens": these occur across most if not all cultures, ranging from traditional circumcision practices (male and female), to silicone injections to enlarge breasts, to "hormonal adjustments" women take to deal with menopause, to sex-change operations.

Training tip: The lists may look something like this:

Biological	Socially-determined
Breast-feeding	Feeding children
Sexual organs (male or female)	Cooking
Menstruation	
Pregnancy	Head of household
Growing a beard	Boxing and combat sports
Voice breaking	Knitting and sewing

The summary of these "buzz" discussions should recognise that biological differences obviously do exist – they are "a fact of life". But how they actually occur, how they affect our behaviour, and how these "givens" affect how we act towards others, is overlaid at every point by culture, understanding, experience, and sometimes by personal choice.

One further point that may arise is whether it is easy or acceptable to discuss these issues publicly. Should only men to men, or women to women talk about these issues? Can they be discussed with people from outside one's own culture?

Gender roles

Now that you have established the difference between sex and gender, build on this knowledge to help participants understand how this leads to women occupying secondary positions – socially, politically and economically in every country of the world.

Exercise: What are gender roles?

In plenary or in small groups, fill out the table in **Handout five** of the biologically and socially determined roles of men and women. Are there physical differences between the roles assigned to men and to women? Do the biological "facts" we discussed earlier play a part in how people act within these roles? If so, should we call this a natural division of labour? Switch the terms "man" and "woman" at the top of the column. Ask the class whether a person from the "other" sex could still do the job – and whether in fact participants know of people who do this job. Switch the headings back to their "proper" place. Ask the class how these constructed roles result in women occupying an inferior position to men. As the last part of this exercise, ask participants to suggest "psychological" characteristics associated with men and women. Do these reinforce the role divisions on the chart?

Training tips: The reproductive function is the only one that is biologically determined. The roles in the home, community and workplace are "grafted" onto these biological roles. Thus it is assumed that because women give birth to children, therefore they must care for them and for the home and offer voluntary "care" services in the community. Gender stereotypes are carried into the work place, where women predominate in the "care" professions like being secretaries, nurses, domestic workers etc. Men on the other hand are assumed to provide and protect and they take on "control" work in the community and workplace – they are the politicians, managers and decision-makers; working in industry, business etc. When a man does the job it is often given a different name than the same job that a woman does.

Through interactive questions and answers, draw out what is amiss with these "socially constructed roles". For example:

1. They lead to stereotyping. No individual exists in a little box like this. It's possible for men to raise children, and for women to lead nations. It's also possible to be caring and to be ambitious; to be emotional and to be strong.
2. The effect of the roles that women are assigned is to make them inferior to men in almost every way, in almost every country:

- **Economically**, the work that women do in the home is unpaid, and most women's work in the community is voluntary. When women do enter the "formal economy" they earn, on average, almost half what men earn because the "care work" in which women predominate is not as valued in our society as much work that involves "control" in which men predominate.
- **Politically**, whether in the home, community or in the nation, women are glaringly absent from decision-making. This makes a mockery of concepts of equal participation, citizenship, democracy, responsive governance etc.
- **Socially,** women are often defined as minors their whole lives, answerable first to their fathers, then to their husbands, and later in life even to their sons, and their brothers-in-law.
- **Gender violence:** The ultimate enforcement of any difference in power relations is violence. This kind of violence is even more frightening than others because it is often socially condoned. The man is expected to be strong and assertive and in control – to the point of being violent. The woman is expected to suffer in silence. She is frequently blamed and blames herself for any breakdown in relationships.

Finally, many behavioural characteristics – emotions, abilities to think, the ways we act – are linked by our societies to gender roles. These may also be explained in terms of biological difference – although we have very little evidence that this is the case. For example: women are often expected to be emotional and loving; the "biological link" suggested is that this allows them to react positively to inarticulate crying babies (which they are supposed to take responsibility for). Men are aggressive and violent; which is supposed to come from "instinctive" defence of their (helpless) women and children.

ROLES AND ASSUMED ROLES	WOMAN	MAN
BIOLOGICALLY DETERMINED		
SOCIALLY DETERMINED		
HOME		
COMMUNITY		
WORKPLACE		
PERSONALITY TRAITS = SOCIALLY DETERMINED		

Gender is about both men and women

Gender has often been seen (or dismissed?) as dealing "just with the problems of women". Commenting on how the press in Africa addresses gender, Edem Djokotoe points out: "A general impression people have is that gender is synonymous with women, and that when a column or page is created to deal with gender, people expect it to focus on women's issues that will be read only by women...." – *Gender in Media Training: A Southern African Tool Kit, p 4.*

Exercise: World in or out of focus?
Examine the images of the "World in Focus" in **Handout six.** What does it say about women? What does it say about men?

Training tip: Men are cast as involved in public life, but violent and destructive. Women are either sex objects, or victims. Use this "snapshot of the world" to lead a discussion on how stereotypes affect both women and men.

Gender norms

The definitions of men and women – "masculinity" and "femininity" – use separate and different criteria for what is good or bad.

For example: the negative image for a "good male figure" is very often not "a good female figure". Instead, the "bad" image could be a man failing to show those characteristics that make up the picture of a "good male". The male "AIDS victim" is a half-starved, bony body (undoubtedly at death's door) whereas an emaciated young woman may be seen as attractive.
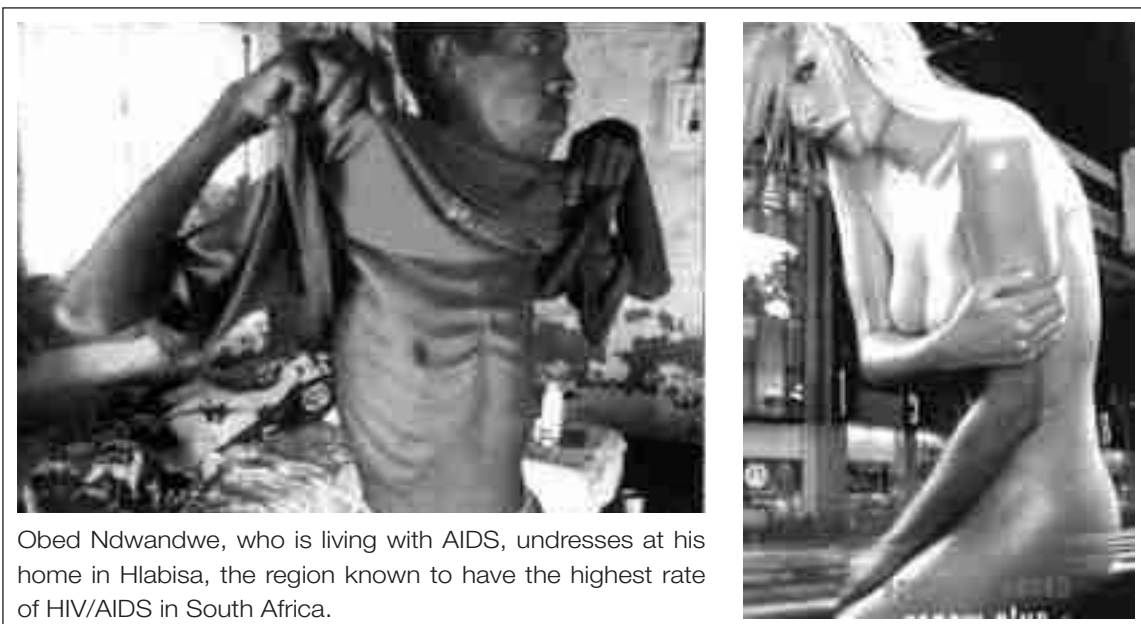
Obed Ndwandwe, who is living with AIDS, undresses at his home in Hlabisa, the region known to have the highest rate of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

World in focus

"Positive" aspects of gender norms are frequently promoted for one side of the gender division only – and not the other side. Thus, successful men are seen as aggressive, more often violent (if only to defend and protect "dependents") and independent and wary of ties. A women who adopts those same attitudes is more likely to be told she is failing as a woman – "insensitive, aggressive, a bitch".

It is generally more difficult to identify the impact of this apparently "positive" gender bias, and to find remedies, than it is to assess obviously oppressive gender practices. After all, most people *want* to achieve the positive norms of their society and work towards those goals. Too often, a person who complains that "positive norms" expected of men are different from the positive norms expected of women is accused of "hating men".

It should be noted, finally, that while gender is not a pseudonym for sex, it does cover how sex and sexual characteristics are treated by society. Thus, one common instance of gender bias in photographic imagery is that many publications will explicitly show a woman's sexual (physical, biological) features, but rarely display the male equivalent.

Gender stereotypes

A stereotype is a generalisation about a group of people or events; a particular individual is then judged in terms of the generalisation, which may or may not be appropriate or accurate for that person; rather than judging the individual on their own merits. Appropriately, the term stereotype comes from the early print industry: it was a metal plate for printing made from set-up lines of type, that then was reproduced exactly on the press.

As a process, stereotyping defines the nature of a person (or object or event) by placing them in a particular category, often by "labelling" the person on the basis of a specific characteristic. Assumptions about the group become the framework for interpreting and assessing the person's behaviour, and for interaction with the person.

This stereotyping process thus requires: first, that the person is clearly labelled with the "defining characteristic". Second, that the category is widely recognised as a group, and believed to adhere to particular practices (which may, or may not, be related in some way to the "defining characteristic"). Thirdly, the person and their actions are measured in terms of these beliefs about their designated category.

> ### Definition
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> **Stereotype:** Reducing a person to a mere instance of a characteristic – Oxford English Dictionary

A further issue that arises with stereotyping – one that plays an important role in photographic imagery – comes around the process of identifying people as "us and them". Social scientists and psychologists point out that people we consider part of "our group" are usually granted a great deal more leeway in behaviour, and in achievement, than people we label as "them" or "not us". If a member of "our group" does something we view as wrong, most people try to find an explanation that does not condemn or blame them. A member of "their group" who does something wrong reinforces our distrust and dislike of that group – they are "wrong" from the beginning.

Imaging gender stereotypes

The following exercise aims to identify basic gender "markers" used within the society, and by the media.

Exercise: Be a lady, be a man!

Draw basic shapes of a woman and man. Ask participants to think about the kinds of things people say when they tell a person to "be a man!" or "be a lady!" Draw these onto the shapes. Discuss the outcome.

Training tips: This exercise turns up the most common images and symbols that we associate with male and female, "masculine" and "feminine". It calls upon participants in the exercise to identify, and articulate, the key gender stereotypes that come up again and again in visual imagery. The results provide us with a pool of images and symbols that capture the "common knowledge" that pervades our society around gender divisions and characteristics. Some points that come up through the exercise:

(a) In the female figure, symbols include: make-up (big red lips and outlined eyes), handbags, high heels, short skirts; elaborate hairdos (in one exercise, women were drawn as having fancy hairdos, with the comment "spend hours getting their hair done" on the side); occasionally pictures of children and housework (pots) are also added "accessories". Sexual characteristics are usually much more prominent and explicit in images of women than those of men.

(b) In the male figures, "respectable" and expensive business clothing – ties, watches, "good solid shoes"; accessories like briefcases and cellphones. Sometimes bigger shoulders and biceps come up; but very often the man's attraction is often instead indicated through references to power or wealth, and women followers and admirers.

(c) Some points which may not come up in the concrete images, but may be mentioned, include:

- Men are often pictured as "strong" by including symbols of authority, money or power (this can be very conscious: US President Bush during the Iraq war made a point of always being photographed against US seal or flag; with a big office desk before him).
- Men are more commonly portrayed as "doing things" while women are shown as passive; pictures of women frequently have hidden small or ineffective hands (often cropped out of the picture to show more of the torso, breasts and hips); women's faces are defined as beautiful when less "laugh-lines" or wrinkles (i.e. less evidence of character, experience, reaction); links to women portrayed as object (passive, not active, not character) rather than subject.
- Women are rarely pictured as using guns, weapons, or physical force – where these aspects appear, women are almost always shown as receiving, as victims. (One way to bring this up during the exercise is to ask if there should be a gun or other weapon in either of the gender picture – and where or how it should appear).
- Older, poor, and badly dressed – otherwise considered "not beautiful" – women are rarely mentioned, and when they are they are shown as negatives – as figures of fun, dislike, ugly etc.

The Objectification of women

Much of the image industry that deals with "women's domains" has evolved words, concepts, and mechanisms to ensure women appear as objects.

The "look like an object" approach can be found in the "clothes-horse" of the fashion world, to the insistence upon blank-expression, smiling grimace and sunglasses covering the expression of high-society women. More recently, it is fashionable to inject a chemical toxin, Botox, into facial muscles, causing muscle paralysis that does away with laugh-lines, wrinkles and crows feet. But some film directors working with people using Botox have complained that treated faces are unable to frown or show other expression.

Archetypes versus stereotypes

An interesting discussion arose recently in a workshop for sub-editors in Cape Town. At what point is an image an archetype (which would be a positive way to approach a subject), or a stereotype (which can be damaging)?

Discuss images such as the one above in class. Does the woman portrayed have any character other than her shape and sex?

Exercise: What would you call this picture?

Discuss the three images in **Handout seven.** Would you describe them as archetypes or stereotypes?

Training tip: Perhaps, in defining what kinds of visual models we promote for gender roles and norms, we need to consider at what stage an image is presented as a standard we should try to meet – rather than as an adventurous attempt at something new.

Definition

Archetype – Prototype, or the original model that others strive to be.

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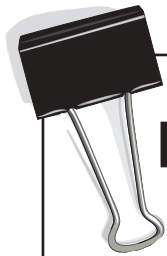
Archetype or stereotype?

Photo by Fletecher Gonga

LABOUR OF LOVE: Hakeem Kae-Kazim with his daughter Shadha, whom he delivered at home when his wife, Bronwyn, went into fast-moving labour. PHOTO: LEON LESTRADE

Saturday Star, May 17 2003.

Photo by Trevor Davies.