

# THE MEANING OF MASCULINITIES

**Sex is biological:** From the moment we are born, we are learning about both sex and gender. At birth, we are assigned a sex, either female or male, based on our biological characteristics (internal/external sex organs, chromosome and hormonal profiles). This division of people into either male or female does not recognize intersex people (those whose biological makeup includes both male and female characteristics).

**Gender is social:** On the basis of assigned sex (male/female), we grow up learning about the meanings and inequalities associated with this male/female difference. The term 'gender' refers to these social expectations that are associated with being male or female. Throughout childhood we are taught, in direct and indirect ways, about the roles, behaviors and attributes that are considered appropriate to being a man/boy and those that are appropriate to being a woman/girl. One of the first things we learn is the idea of gender difference; the difference between being a woman or man, or being a girl or boy. We see gender differences all around us: in the different games that boys and girls are allowed and encouraged to play; the different opportunities that young women and young men may have in life; the different work that women and men often do both inside and outside the home; and the different rights that men and women may enjoy. Gender difference is taught and reinforced continually - within our families, friendships and relationships, as well as our schools, workplaces and places of worship. Gender differences are also often gender hierarchies; in most societies, men on average have greater status, opportunities and rights compared to women.

**Masculinity = social expectations of being a man:** The term 'masculinity' refers to the roles, behaviors and attributes that are considered appropriate for boys and men in a given society. Masculinity is constructed and defined socially, historically and politically, rather than being biologically driven. We can think of masculinity as a shorthand for talking about the social expectations and practices of manhood; expectations and practices which are reinforced everyday by individuals as well as by institutions, such as the law, the economy, religion, education and the media. Women as well as men are involved in reinforcing these social expectations of masculinity (e.g. when a mother tells her son to act like a man and not to cry.)

**Femininity = social expectations of being a woman:** By the same token, the term 'femininity' refers to a society's ideas about the roles, behaviors and attributes considered appropriate for girls and women.

**Hierarchy of masculinity over femininity:** In all societies, there are many ideas about masculinity and femininity that are harmful to girls and women, and to boys and men. Research suggests that in most societies ideas about masculinity are defined in opposition to ideas about femininity. The roles, behaviors and attributes that are considered appropriate for men are often defined as the opposite of those associated with femaleness and considered appropriate for women. More than this, the roles, behaviors and attributes that are associated with masculinity are usually considered superior to those associated with femininity; there is not only a difference between masculinity and femininity but also a hierarchy, in many aspects of life.

**Power is seen as masculine:** In most parts of the world, having power over political, economic and social affairs is associated with masculinity. The roles, behaviors and attributes that are associated with maleness and considered masculine usually bring greater social status, economic reward and political power than those associated with the feminine. Even though more and more women are taking on leadership roles in many walks of life, from government to private companies, the norm remains that leadership is seen as masculine and done by men; authority in the public sphere still has a male face. As of June 2017, women make up only 23.4 percent of national parliamentarians, 7.9 percent head of state, and 5.2 percent head of government. The norm that equates leadership with masculinity is one example of political masculinities. The term "political masculinities" refers to ideas about and practices of masculinity that shape and are shaped by political actors, processes and institutions.

**Public/private distinction:** In many societies, women's power (if any) is associated with the domestic space of the household and family; the masculine/feminine binary is associated with a public/private split. Even as more and more women are entering the 'public' sphere of waged work, the 'private' sphere of the family remains a 'feminine' space, with care work and household work still regarded largely as 'women's work'. Globally, on average, the time women spend daily in caring for the home and children is still about three times what men spend.

**Not all men are powerful:** Men dominate positions of political, economic and social power. In no country does gender equality exist. Of course, this does not mean that all men are or feel powerful. Some men may feel relatively powerless in terms of their political influence, wealth or social status. Men differ greatly in their access to and control over economic, political and social power. Economic inequalities, racism and ethnic discrimination, xenophobia and antiimmigrant discrimination, faith-based persecution and other forces of social inequality create hierarchies among men, as they do between men and women.

**Patriarchal masculinities:** Patriarchal masculinities is a term that can be used to describe those ideas about and practices of masculinity that emphasize the superiority of masculinity over femininity and the authority of men over women. Ideas about and practices of patriarchal masculinities maintain gender inequalities. Violence against girls and women maintains and is maintained by ideas about and practices of patriarchal masculinities. Violence is used, mostly by men but sometimes by other women, to keep girls and women in their position of having less economic, political and social power than men overall.

**Variety of masculinities:** Because masculinity is about the social expectations of manhood, this means that there is no single, fixed definition of masculinity. There are many socially constructed definitions for being a man and these can change over time and from place to place; as we can see from our own lives when we compare the lives of our fathers and grandfathers with those of the younger generation of men today. If different masculinities exist, then alternatives to patriarchal masculinities are possible. In many places we can see that there are roles, behaviors and attributes that are considered appropriate for men which emphasize relations of equality and respect between women and men and which regard femininities as different but equally valued.