OPTIONS AGYW Training Package

Attachment 2: Act Like a Man, Act Like a Woman

**Introduction**

* The aim of this activity is to increase awareness of differences in rules of behaviour for men and women and understand how gender roles affect the lives of men and women.
* This activity will help you think about perceptions of gender norms in your country or region. Remember that these perceptions can be affected by class, race, ethnicity, and other differences and may differ between yourself and others. It is also important to remember that gender norms are constantly changing in many countries.
* As you go through these steps, realize that they are meant for both men and women to consider. Even though you may feel that you have more knowledge about the norms for your own sex, you should still be able to reflect on norms for the opposite sex. Gender norms are generalised and shared by the majority of society, and both men and women can pressure their same-sex and opposite-sex peers to “act like a man” or “act like a woman.”
* As you go through the activity, reflect on how gender norms contribute to sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV.

**Facilitator introduces activity:**

* Have you ever been told to “act like a man”?
* If yes, think about how it made you feel.
* Have you heard men or boys being told to “act like a man”?
* Have you ever told someone to “act like a man”?
* Why do you think people say this to men or boys?
* Now, have you ever been told to “act like a woman”?
* If yes, think about how it made you feel.
* Have you ever heard other women or girls being told to “act like a woman”?
* Why do you think people say this to women and girls?

**Highlight the following points:**

* Sometimes people are told to act like a man or woman because they are behaving in a way that is traditionally thought of as unmasculine or unfeminine. As an example, for boys, it may be because they are crying or because they are not being “tough” enough. For girls, it may be because they are playing/dressing in ways that are typically considered “masculine”. People may do this in many different situations and for many different reasons. The important thing is to think about what this construction of being a man or woman generally means in your context—not only what you yourself believe but also what you understand as the expectations in your context.
* We are now going to look more closely at these two phrases so we can begin to see how society creates very different rules for men and women regarding how they are supposed to behave. These rules are sometimes called “gender norms” because they define what is “normal” for men and women to think, feel, and act. These rules often restrict the lives of both women and men by keeping men in their “act like a man” box and women in their “act like a woman” box.

**Act like a man**

Now, let’s think of a list of expectations or behaviours for "act like a man." What are men in your community told in terms of how they should behave or what people expect of them? Keep in mind that there is no right or wrong answer; the idea is to begin to list and reflect about these expectations. Also, keep in mind that you should list the common expectations regarding manhood in your community/society—not what you personally believe should be expected of men (though both may coincide at times).

To help, we are going to give you one example: “strong.” In many societies, men are expected to be strong. This does not just mean strong in terms of physical strength (though it can). It also means strong in the sense of having power or not displaying weakness. Does “strong” fit on your list? Yes or no?

**Note:** Expectations for men can vary between regions, among countries, and even within countries.

* Please list some characteristics you believe are generally expected from men in your context.

Write your list in a box:

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| **Act like a man**   * Strong |

Below are some other examples of characteristics that are often mentioned as being expected of men. Accept them into your list if you believe they are relevant and you haven’t already included them in your list.

* Tough
* In control
* Does not back down
* Brave/courageous
* Does not cry
* Provider
* Aggressive
* Violent
* Decision maker
* Has had multiple sex partners (female only)
* Is always ready for sex
* Drinks or smokes
* Needs to prove he is heterosexual
* Is self-reliant/independent
* Takes risks

The list is presented as a box to help emphasise that these expectations work like a box, in that they constrain what we are able to do or what we feel comfortable doing. Place arrows outside the box pushing inward, and identify different actors in society that at different times may seek to keep us in these boxes.

**Act like a man**

* **Strong**

The arrows can be, for example:

* Peers (i.e., friends, co-workers, school mates)
* Family members
* Partners or spouses
* Public institutions (i.e., teachers, employers, medical staff, police)
* Government policies and laws
* Media
* Religious institutions
* What do you think about your “act like a man” list? Is it realistic to expect men to live up to these expectations?
* Which of these messages can be potentially harmful? For example, believing that, as a man, you must be strong all the time can keep you from admitting when you are ill (a specific form of being weak). It can also be part of what keeps men from seeking health care or even help from others with their problems. Being strong can also lead a man to cover up any weaknesses, including expressing fear or sadness (emotions that at times can be perceived as weakness).

**Act like a woman**

Now, begin to think more about "act like a woman." What are women told in their community in terms of how they should behave or what people expect out of them? Please list some of these behaviours now.

To help, we are going to give you one example: “submissive.” Women are expected to be submissive (especially to their husbands) in many societies. This does not necessarily mean that they are always submissive, but that they are generally supposed to accede to their husband’s decision (as head of the household) if there is ever a difference of opinion between the spouses.

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| **Act like a woman**   * Submissive |

Expectations for women can vary between regions, among countries, and even within countries. Please list some characteristics you believe are expected from women in your context.

**Possible additions to your “act like a woman” list:**

* Weaker/need to be protected
* Passive/submissive
* Must be attractive/sexy but not too sexy
* Must dress “respectably”
* Must care/nurture her marriage/relationship
* Must please her partner sexually
* Caregiver (for children, partner, and sick relatives)
* Homemaker (responsible for the housework/cooking)
* Must obey husband
* Must produce children (in some cases, male children)

The list is presented as a box to help emphasise that these expectations work like a box, in that they constrain what we are able to do or what we feel comfortable doing. Draw arrows outside the box pushing inward; these represent different actors in society that at different times may seek to keep us in these boxes. Who are these actors?

**Act like a woman**

* **Strong**

The arrows can be:

* Peers (i.e., friends, co-workers, schoolmates)
* Family members
* Partners or spouses
* Public institutions (i.e., teachers, employers, medical staff, police)
* Government policies and laws
* Media
* Religious institutions
* What do you think about this list? Is it realistic to expect women to live up to these expectations?
* Which of these messages can be potentially harmful? For example, believing that as a woman you must be “submissive or passive” can keep you from asserting your own views or making decisions that are in your best interest. If you believe you should use condoms as a couple but your partner does not, being submissive can mean that you will end up accepting his decision instead of asserting your right to use protection in a sexual relationship. In the end, this can be harmful to a woman, her partner, or her family.

Now think about the next few questions:

* How does living in the box affect a woman’s health and the health of others, especially in relation to reproductive health, unintended pregnancies, and the use of contraception?
* How does living in the box limit women’s lives and the lives of those around them?
* What happens to women who try not to follow gender rules (e.g., who try “living outside the box”)? What do people say about them? How are they treated?
* How can “living outside the box” help women avoid unintended pregnancies and improve their SRH, including reducing STIs and HIV infection?

### Transformed men/women

Now we are going to think of another list, this time for “transformed men/women:” men and women who do not live within the “act like a man” and “act like a woman” boxes that we created.

In the end, the characteristics that belong to men who live outside the box should be similar to or the same as those for women who live outside the box. In other words, gender expectations and roles should be flexible, with either person (male or female) being able to be strong, show emotions, care for children, be a breadwinner, be assertive, and discuss relationships.

Let’s make the list together.

The important thing is not to create another box, but instead to convey that individual men and women can choose what roles and behaviours they want for themselves throughout their lives. This also allows couples to be flexible and change roles (e.g., breadwinners, caregivers) as it best suits them. In many ways, this is far less stressful and far less limiting than living in a box.

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| **Transformed men** | **Transformed women** |
| * Breadwinner * Caregiver * Homemaker * Strong * Able to express range of emotions * Willing to ask for help * Courageous * Assertive | * Breadwinner * Caregiver * Homemaker * Strong * Able to express range of emotions * Willing to ask for help * Courageous * Assertive |

Notice that even though many items in this new list come from the “act like a man” and “act like a woman” boxes, it is not a box. It is meant to reflect freedom of choice and equality, in that both men and women can play any of the roles. That said, it does not mean that men and women must do or play exactly the same roles all of the time. Also, many items have not been included (e.g., violent, passive/submissive).

Consider some of the following questions:

* Are your perceptions about the roles of men and women affected by what your family and friends think? How?
* How can you, in your own life, challenge some of the non-equitable ways men are expected to act?
* How can you challenge some of the non-equitable ways that women are expected to act?
* Lastly, do the media influence gender norms? If so, in what way?
* Can you think of images from the media that portray women negatively or stereotypically (i.e., as in the "act like a woman" box)?
* Can you think of images from the media that portray men negatively or stereotypically (i.e., as in the "act like a man" box)?

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| Here are some examples of ways in which the media can portray men and women in ways that can push them to stay in their gender boxes.   * News media sometimes cover stories about sexual violence against women in a way that judges women and places responsibility for the crime on the victim. Also, mothers who abandon their children are often treated in a sensationalistic and judgmental way, even though fathers abandoning their children (which is hardly covered as news) is far more common. * Advertisements for beer and liquor in some countries use images that treat women like objects or promote traditional versions of masculinity (i.e., real men drink). * Pop music sometimes portrays sexuality in ways that can be violent and non-consensual. * Advertisements for cooking or household products often focus solely on women, even when they are not the sole consumers of the products, thus promoting traditional versions of femininity. * Films often portray men as the primary characters and, in action movies, as heroes who settle problems with violence and are the main decision makers. They often portray women as passive and in need of protection or saving. |

**Closing**

Throughout their lives, men and women receive messages from peers, family, media, and society about how they should act and how they should relate to women and men. Many of the differences between the genders are constructed by society and are not part of our nature or biological make-up. Many of these expectations are completely fine, as long as they can apply to both men and women. We should all have the ability to identify norms or expectations that we do not want for ourselves, as well as the right to keep them from limiting our full potential as human beings. We also have the right to decide which roles or behaviours we prefer as individuals, regardless of social expectations based on our gender. As we become more aware of how some gender stereotypes can negatively affect our lives and communities, we can think constructively about how to challenge them and promote more positive gender roles and relationships in our lives and communities.

**Acknowledgment to EngenderHealth**

This interactive activity was downloaded and adapted from Engender Health:

<https://www.engenderhealth.org/pubs/gender/gender-toolkit/act-like-a-man-act-like-a-woman.html>— downloaded 4/04/2018 (used with permission)

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