

Strand 2 | Relationships and Sexuality

Learning Outcome 2.4:	Students should be able to examine how both positive and harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online, and in society and discuss strategies for challenging and changing harmful attitudes and narratives
Pre-learning:	Before discussing this topic, it may be helpful to review Junior Cycle SPHE learning outcomes 1.4, 1.5, 3.6 . Students also need to have engaged with related Senior Cycle SPHE learning outcomes, in particular learning about healthy relationships (2.1, 2.2 and 2.3)

What is the important learning?

Learning Outcome **2.4** is asking students to examine how social attitudes are formed in relation to gender and consider which attitudes are harmful and need to be changed. Gender means the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, characteristics, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men. Gender is socially and culturally constructed, so understandings of gender differ across contexts and over time.

In History or Politics and Society class, students might be examining some of the structures and institutions that have created and maintained gender inequalities in the past, such as in education, the workplace, courts. Despite advancements in gender equality in Ireland over recent times, many experiences of gender inequality remain. In this learning outcome the focus of learning is on examining gender norms, expectations and attitudes that prevail today, and asking what aspects are helpful, what aspects are limiting or harmful and what needs to change.

While women all over the world disproportionately experience the negative consequences of restrictive and harmful gender norms, discussion should also focus on examining how some gender norms are harmful for men too. For instance, expectations that men should not show emotion have been shown to damage men's mental health. In addition to addressing the gendered challenges that women and men face, the unique issues experienced by gender minorities, such as transgender and non-binary individuals should be included in this discussion.

The goal of this learning outcome is to enable young people to recognise how limiting expressions of masculinity and femininity can inhibit the lives of all young people and perpetuate gender inequalities.

Approaches to consider when teaching about gender:

- It may be useful to begin by reflecting on the progress that has been made in relation to gender equality and examples of positive and expansive gender attitudes today before discussing what still needs to be achieved.
- It is important to engage young people with the evidence of and research on gender roles, expectations and attitudes, and their impact, so as to convey the importance of the issue, before exploring solutions. (See SPHE resources section of NCCA toolkit for links to research)
- Explain the concept of intersectionality and encourage young people to adopt an intersectional lens by asking themselves how people's experiences may differ with different overlapping identities e.g., different ethnicities, abilities, economic backgrounds, sexual orientations.

- Draw young people's attention to the limiting roles and expectations that attach to gender, such as emotional stoicism or aggression for men and submission or irrationality for women.
- Draw attention to how sexist and homophobic attitudes often reinforce one another, with boys and men receiving harmful messaging that if they do not conform to masculine norms, they are 'gay'.
- Affirm that gender inequality produces harmful impacts for all people and ask students to consider how women, men, and gender minorities suffer unique harmful consequences.
- Consider how rigid gender stereotypes can prompt violence and harassment against those who are gender-non-conforming.
- It is important to engage students with the power dynamics that operate in favour of men, whilst recognising that such power structures have harmful consequences for everyone.
- Avoid labelling masculinity as 'toxic' as this oversimplifies the issue and can lead to shaming men rather than encouraging open dialogue that can lead to awareness and change in relation to gender roles and behaviours.
- Remind students that gender inequality, sexism, and misogyny can often exist in media, online and society in less obvious ways. Encourage them to look out for subtle harmful messages and share these in class.

Possible questions to explore:

- Where can restrictive or harmful gender attitudes and messages be seen in the media today? Where can you see positive and expansive representations of gender in the media?
- What harmful impacts are experienced as a result of limited or harmful attitudes about masculinity and femininity? (links to LO 2.6.)
- What unique challenges face gender minorities, such as transgender and non-binary individuals, due to assumptions and attitudes related to gender?

Useful definitions

Gender: gender means the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, characteristics, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men. Gender is socially and culturally constructed, so understandings of gender differ across contexts and over time.

Gender identity: refers to a person's felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex registered at birth.

Gender expression: refers to ways that people express their gender externally through behaviour, clothing, demeanour etc., typically understood along a spectrum of masculinity and femininity.

Sex: refers to the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics that are defined as being male and female. When children are born, their sex is largely decided or 'assigned' on the basis of their external genitalia, which generally – but not always – reflects their internal hormonal and chromosomal make-up.

Possible follow-on learning outcome:

Engagement in LO 2.4 is an important foundation for engaging in teaching and learning about abusive and violent relationships in LOs 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8. as the social context of a gender unequal society needs to be discussed in order to understand the root causes of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV).

Go to the SPHE Toolkit for [classroom resources linked to LO 2.4](#)