

from the book **PINK AND BLUE WORLD Gender Stereotypes and Their Consequences**

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One Is Not Born a Woman or a Man

Sex and Gender

One is not born a woman, but becomes one

Simone de Beauvoir

One is not born a woman? Or a man? Is that really so? The first thing we learn after a baby is born is her sex. Surely, the words “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl” are statements naming some biological reality that is usually beyond any doubt. But that is not the end of the story. The verdict “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl” does not concern only biological characteristics. It also decides about the future direction of the social development of the baby as a girl and woman or as a boy and man will head. On the one hand, the statement names the biological sex, on the other hand it implies the gender of a person as a set of social roles and cultural norms and expectations related to femininity and masculinity.

Gender Difference

So, is it a boy or a girl? Hansel or Gretel? Dominic or Dominique? Kim or Kim? Beautiful Day or Sitting Bull? Stupid Hans or Cinderella?

Babies get their names so that they will not get lost in the world; so that they can become part of human society. But there is more to a name: in most societies the name indicates the sex of its bearer and becomes important in gender specific socialization of a child. The child is not given just any kind of a name but a name that clearly denotes its sex. Rules about reading names as male and female differ in different cultures. The name is a complicated cultural construct and as such it is close to gender. In our society, naming rules are also regulated by the law. Laws and regulations require the congruence of sex and gender and they take for granted that sex is unambiguous (which, by the way, in a small percentage of babies is not a clear biological given, and their parents have to choose: either a boy or a girl).

It seems that in order to run smoothly, our society needs to clearly and unequivocally distinguish between the sexes and maintain the social distinctions between femininity and masculinity via deliberate (e.g. the law) and unintentional (e.g. fairy tales) mechanisms. This distinction is substantiated by the role of women and men in reproductive processes, but it does not involve just biological characteristics: different biological functions or capacities of the female and male body are the starting point for other imperative differences regarding the way of life, characteristics, appearance and behaviour. At present, the definition of the role of women and men, and the division of labour between genders is closely related to the understanding of pregnancy and childbirth as the only woman’s predestination. In spite of changed social circumstances of reproduction, gender differentiation, and considerable polarization of interests, activities and personalities of women and men prevail in most areas

of our life; but that does not mean that these divisions are “natural”. The relationship between women and men, based chiefly on concrete – and variable – norms of the gender role, differs in different societies and time periods. It is not “natural”, but historically, socially and broadly speaking culturally determined.

Legitimisation of Inequality

We know the rhetoric of inequality between women and men in its past – socialist – and present-day variation. We have experiences with changes in gender relations in both the public and private sphere but also with cemented prejudice about changeless femininity and masculinity. Where is this contradiction coming from and what purpose does it serve?

We can use arguments about tradition, nature or natural order of the world and hence confirm the domination of the male way of seeing,¹ taking for granted the existing power relations, and believe that they are immutable. Or we can critically look at the current constructs of masculinity and femininity, on the role of gender specific socialization of men and women in maintain and confirming of inequality in our society – and thus open up the space for changes that can be effectively started in school.

The conviction that the dissimilarity of the female and male role naturally follows from their biological difference is one of the most stable pillars of our culture. Its power is great. It ignores everything that subverts it – historical, social or psychological facts – and it even contravene our own experience. Through the use of stereotypes, people around us daily convince us about the “truthfulness” of the statement about the strong and weak sex, which has about as much validity as the statement that women wear skirts and wear men trousers. As a consequence of the belief in natural gender difference we often forget what women and men as human beings have in common, what unites them. And although the biological sex is not completely separable from cultural gender, and gender stereotypes “hinge” on biological sex, the variability of women and men within their own sex/gender is much more pronounced than the difference between women and men as groups.

Differentiation of sexes and genders is significantly implicated in the arrangement of relationships between women and men in society, chiefly because it legitimises this arrangement as natural. The argument about unquestionable validity of natural laws justifies unequal division of labour between women and men, in which women do most of unpaid or worse paid work. It also justifies unequal distribution of power between women and men – the power to decide about themselves and the world that surrounds them.

The belief that there is some generally valid and correct “masculinity” and “femininity” puts women and men into a narrow straightjacket of prescribed roles that do not correspond with real needs of partnership and cooperation between people in society a do not respect the individuality of women and men as unique human beings. Therefore, in our society the words “a boy” or a “girl” is often a verdict putting the baby on a track leading to either the pink of the blue world.

Two Waves of Feminism²

Already in the 18th and 19th century, critically thinking women and men questioned the ideology of immutability of the predestined female and male role. Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges, Stuart Mill, the suffragists, Rosa Mayreder, Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová and

others mostly critiqued the “female nature” that should prevent women from getting education and the right to vote. The first wave of feminism in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century focused mostly on women’s suffrage.

Nowadays, we take women’s right to vote for granted and we do not give much thought to whether it is “unwomanly” and whether its exercise – requiring making independent decisions, seriously violates women’s health or morals (even the contemporary definition of the “right womanhood” presumes that a woman “doesn’t know what she wants”, “asks other for directions”, “lets herself being led”, “is dependent”). Or more precisely – we don’t give too much thought to the active right to vote, but we often and without hesitation comment on the prescriptive “femininity” of a female politician using stereotypical female attributes.

The first country to grant women the right vote was New Zealand in 1883. In Czechoslovakia, women gained the right to vote in 1919, in France as late as 1944. The illusion that universal suffrage would ensure gender equality swiftly dissipated. The French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her iconoclastic book *The Second Sex* (first published in 1949) examines deeper roots of women’s subordination from the perspective of concrete family relations and socialization of girls and boys, as well as from the perspective of transmission of tradition and knowledge in society as a whole. The formation of a “womanly” passive woman (“don’t be a tomboy”, “don’t soil you dress”, “be a nice/good girl”) and a “manly” active man (“boys don’t cry”, “don’t be a sissy”, “fight with the dragon”) is constantly happening on several levels: in fairytales a woman will learn that “in order to be happy she must be loved, and in order to be loved she must wait for her love” (de Beauvoir, published in Slovak: *Aspekt* 1/2000). Fairytales, stories and folk songs are filled with Sleeping Beauties, Cinderellas, stepdaughters, and women who give, wait and suffer. “In songs and fairytales the young man adventurously sets out to look for a wife. He fights with dragons, wrestles with giants; she is locked up in a tower, palace, garden, tied to a rock, captured, sleeping – she is waiting.” (Ibid.). De Beauvoir’s disillusioning analysis of prevailing cultural patterns maintaining a hierarchical relationship between women and men and putting women in the position the “second” sex caused much furore and countless discussions. The book *The Second Sex* has become cult reading for the second wave of feminism. The author in the book summarizes cultural underpinnings of the female role: “One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between, male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.” (de Beauvoir, in Slovak in : *Aspekt* 1/2000.)

The second wave of feminism that started in the USA in the 1960s and in Western Europe in the 1970s³ initially focused upon women’s access to paid jobs, reproductive and sexual rights and health. Later the spectrum of issues broadened: violence against women and children (esp. the issue of sexualised violence), inadequate representation of women at all decision making levels, the domination of the “male perspective” and indivisibility of women in science, research and education, and others.

The feminist movement and thinking was diverse already at its beginning and with the passage of time it has grown even more pluralistic – therefore it is better to speak about feminisms (such as ecofeminism, African-American feminism, liberal feminism, socialist feminism, feminism of gender equality) rather than a singular feminism. These different feminisms mutually overlap, interlink, and complement each other, but they also fight, negate and contradict one another. Their common thread, however, is the conviction that women are

human beings and therefore they have the duties but also responsibilities and rights of a human being.

Sex and Gender

In western countries thanks to feminist thinking the distinction between biological sex and cultural gender has become important part of reflection in science, education and politics esp. since the 1980s.

Feminist and later gender theories have unmasked the gender blindness of the way of seeing that used to be regarded as gender neutral. It became and more difficult to present the domination of the male perspective as seemingly gender neutral.

From the gender perspective it has become apparent that it is not only the female gender role but also the male gender role that is affected by ideas or even the dictate of a concrete society in a concrete time and space. Gender-aware observations and analyses of social structures have shown that problematic it is not only obviously disadvantaged “femininity“, the critique of which already has a long tradition, but also “masculinity“ distancing men from relationships and their responsibility for them. No matter how diverse the gender role when performed by individual women and men may be it is not primarily an individual matter. Its formation is influenced by stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity surrounding us and creating the setting for its performance. The stereotypes condition gender relations that are constructed on the basis of conventional perceptions, cultural patterns and ideologies piling up around the concept of “true“ femininity and masculinity. The symbolic order based on complete difference and mutual “exclusivity“ of the two sexes – as we can see it in the expression “the opposite sex” implying that the man should be the opposite of the woman and vice versa, is not limited to the mere statement about otherness of the sexes. The opposition of sexes is linked to evaluation of this otherness, to creation of hierarchies, to assigning of functions, and to formation of stereotypical ideas.

The Rules of Femininity and Masculinity

No matter what her individual personality and life circumstances may be, each concrete girl or woman is confronted with the basic rule of femininity: „in no case should a woman want to be like a man“. This rule creates a set of expectations that can be summed up by statements such as “she is mindful that a man doesn’t feel weak or inferior“, “she finds her self-fulfilment in caring for others“, “she is sensitive, gentle, compliant“ or “she tolerates much and forgives a lot“. The main rule of masculinity - “since a man is not a woman he never does what a woman does“ – confronts a boy, irrespective of his individual personality and life circumstances, with expectations that could be summed up by statements such as “he wants to be stronger, smarter and wants to earn more money“, “he finds his self-fulfilment in professional success“, “he is tough, never showing his feelings“ or “he tolerates nothing and forgives nothing“.

When comparing these expectations still marked by broadly accepted stereotypical ideas about women and men, one must ask whether it is possible for these women and men to live in a partnership based on fair division of rights and responsibilities in both the private and public life. They will not get away easily with breaking the basic rules – they will suffer ridicule (comedians who ridicule women or “unmanly“ men are commonly rewarded by appreciative bursts of laughter from their audience) and scorn (“masculine“ women or ‘effeminate“ men are often targets of cruel despise).

This general agreement about what is funny and despicable attests to general comprehensibility of gender stereotypes in our culture, and indicates what they are “good for“. They simulate simple orientation in the world: from the perspective of short-term effectiveness it is expedient to use what appears to us as culturally obvious. But the question is: what price do we pay for that.

A stereotype does not have a subject – it is not created and reproduced by someone. It emerges and is reproduced in the web of expectations and those to whom stereotypes pertain cannot influence them. Our own stereotypical expectations depend on stereotypical expectations of others and this creates a vicious circle. For instance, from the stereotype that „women are mothers“ follows the stereotype that „women want to take over exclusive responsibility of childcare“, and from that follows the stereotype that „women seek out part-time jobs“, which in turn discriminates against all women on the labour market. Facing this dead-end situation, people that are discriminated against usually conform to the stereotype that lies at the root of the discriminatory situation. The impossibility to escape, forces them to resign (McKinnon quoted in Holzleithner 2003).

The ubiquitous implicit gender hierarchy daily places us inside the limits of the stereotypical gender role. As it seems, for the sake of social stability it is simpler to maintain the social order based on an unjust and distorting stereotype rather than to constantly negotiate the social order based on open communication and mutual respect.

However, the stereotypical understanding of the female and male role that would confirm and maintain gender inequality is shaking. Its presence in the real life is not as frequent and firm as the ideological constructs in advertising, the media, politics, fairytales, literature or text books are trying to convince us. On the other hand, stereotypical constructs influencing social values are arduously resisting verbal political proclamations about equality between women and men, provisions on gender equality in the Constitution of the Slovak republic, laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex and gender in employment, as well as the reality of changing roles of concrete women and concrete men.

The Pink and Blue Imperative.

The fixed idea about “inborn“ femininity and masculinity glosses over the fact that children enter a micro and macro-cosmos formed by the cultural pattern of gender duality and that in each moment of their lives the socialization of a girl or boy takes place in this divided and hierarchically organized world. Children enter a pre-structured world of expectations, hopes, limits and colours, in which gender as a social category plays a very important role. In our cultural setting, the girl is surrounded by the pink imperative and the boy the blue imperative.

The attribution of gender roles happens by means of communication, evaluation, clothing, selection of toys and games. The decision between a doll and a car does not follow from the biological sex of the baby but from the social evaluation of the toy as either appropriate or inapposite for a girl or a boy. If we, as parents, decide to disrupt this strict division of toys and give a boy, for instance, a doll to play with we are aware of the fact that our decision goes against conventions and that it is more than likely that reactions to a boy playing with a doll will be different from the reactions to a girl. The children are also likely to receive different instructions on how to handle the doll. Usually no one rushes in to remind a boy playing with a doll about how to caress it, and he will not be immediately called “a father“. People around

him will not get excited over his “inborn fatherly instinct“. On the contrary, when a girl is playing with a doll the instructions and appreciation of the adults usually emphasize her presumed future motherhood.

The play of both children is seemingly the same - they are playing with the same toy, but the cultural framework of their play is gender specific. As the author of one the basic studies about gender stereotypical socialization approaches Elena Gianini Belotti points out: “A child has an inborn capacity to play, but the rules and objects are undoubtedly the product of culture.“ (Belotti, in: *Aspekt1*/2000.)

The repertoire of toys is just seemingly broad. Children select their toys and games independently, but they also react to what we offer them. And this offer is already a selection from the existing choice.

An important factor creating the existing offer and guiding parents’ choices is advertising. Advertising works with stereotypes – with their confirmation and subversion. In Slovakia, in toy advertising still prevails uncritical exploitation of gender stereotypes, which leads to their further reproduction even reinforcement. The colour design of ads copies the gender stereotypical rules of the pink and blue world.

Let us demonstrate how this functions on concrete advertising leaflets:

For babies of up to 3 years many toys are still gender neutral. This may not be true for all toys, but it is true for animals and building blocks. Under the slogan “The best for the youngest”, the leaflet offers toys “appropriate” for both girls and boys – it does not discriminate on the basis of their gender. The prevailing yellow colour with no strict gender coding is used to signal openness.



The best for the youngest

The pink and blue worlds of the other pages of the leaflet speak about different demarcation of the space for girls and boys – girls belong to the household (the private sphere), while boys belong to the world (the public sphere); the girls should be practical while the boys should be creative, and the like.

While the girls depicted on the pink page as small mothers (Let's pretend we are moms and housewives) are taking care of dolls, carrying out household chores and taking care of themselves to be pretty, the boys on the blue page are receiving their invitation to the world of creativity and knowledge.



*Let's pretend we are moms and housewives
For young scientists and constructors*

While the girls on the pink page get the message that they are little dressy girls and the best jobs for them are a seamstress, hair dresser or beautician, the boys on the opposite blue page are setting out to conquer the world.



For small adventurers



For small seamstresses and dressy girls

Another advertising leaflet seemingly introduces us to the world of a family, as if the offer from the private sphere “to be like my mom” or “to be like my dad” was equally addressing both girls and boys. At a closer look, however, the situation appears to be very different: the girl on the pink page under the slogan “I want to be like my mom” is doing house chores and taking care of dolls. The boy, who wants to be “like his dad” identifies himself with action figures of superheroes.



...and I want to be like my father

The identification offer for girls is clear: a girl = a future mother. Directly linked to motherhood is the female obligation to take care of their appearance and household. Given the high female unemployment rate in our country it is remarkable that advertising based on such reduction of the female role actually works. Pink departments of toy stores make profit; therefore our society seems to prefer this division of labour - irrespective of the “equality of opportunities”.

The identification offer for boys is much more diverse: a boy = a future professional (or conqueror), but not a future father. The action figures of superheroes whose image is evoked as a paternal model can hardly be considered to be preparation for fatherhood.

Nobody prevents girls and boys from becoming successful professionals or good fathers, respectively, but nobody supports them to become so either. On the contrary, all signals are telling them: you do not live in the same world.

At the beginning, the inquiry into mechanisms of gender stereotypes was based on the idea of female gender stereotypical socialization as limiting and constraining (Scheu in: *Aspekt*

1/2000), which was understandable given the tangible discrimination against women that had been the first impulse for critical approach to traditional roles. This approach considered the male role - in contrast to the female role, to be the source of social privilege but also of higher personal satisfaction. Later it became apparent that also men are constrained by gender stereotypes (see e.g. Bernardová — Schlaferová 1997).

Striking about the given advertisements examples is the fact that girls can at least partly find some reality of the life of their mothers and other women in the presented patterns. That is much harder for boys: the father is absent and not all men they know are scientists or conquerors of new planets.

Games and toys do not exist in the vacuum of arbitrariness – they are socially embedded and serve to put girls and boys on the track of their conventional social role. When children react in accordance with conventional expectations we consider that a “mollifying symptom of normality” (Belotti in: *Aspekt* 1/2000). The selection of toys attests to the fact that children very early know what behaviour is rewarded and what behaviour is regarded as gender appropriate. The fact that differentiation of toys into intended for boy and for girls grows with children’s age points to very strong cultural influences (Oakley 2000).

Gender Relations in Textbooks

„If children were getting all information on gender relations in the grown-up world only from their textbooks they wouldn’t have any idea that they are living in a country in which gender equality is guaranteed by the constitution,“ comments bitterly on her analysis of elementary education textbooks the Polish author Anna Golnikowa.

In school besides official explicit curriculum we present to children also *hidden curriculum*. This curriculum often reinforces existing gender stereotypes esp. gender division of labour. The choice of life paths of boys and girls differs considerably. Rigid gender stereotypes are not limited just to advertising as a symbol of superficial consumerism but they also dominate in textbooks that are a symbol of generational transmission of knowledge.

When going through the pages of ABC books, primers and readers for first classes of elementary schools we often come across stereotypical division of labour in the family:



*The father is reading a newspaper
The mother is pushing a stroller with a baby.*

Boba a Biba majú nové báby.
Biba bábu vozí.
Ale bába nebúva.
Volá: „Ma-ma!“



Boba bábu zasa nosí.
Moja bába je bosá.
Obujem jej belasé  .
Biba a Boba sú malé mamy.
Zabávajú sa s bábami.



*Boba and Biba have new dolls.
Biba is pushing a stroller with her doll.
But the doll is not sleeping. She is crying: Ma-ma!
Boba is carrying her doll.
My doll is barefoot.
I will give her blue slippers.
Biba and Boba are little moms.
They are playing with their dolls.*

Just like advertising, also textbooks prepare girls for their maternal role. Boys are reminded of their paternal role only in passing, in addition to other, more important things – such as a motorcycle or football. In textbooks, boys and men represent people as such, they are universal representatives of the humankind; girls and women are often just invisibly included. Textbooks bring the idea about incompatibility of the image of the real man (The proper man is interested in football) and the father who shares a common world with his children. The image of the mother is reduced to the image of a servant as if the real woman was just a performer of household chores. These images in textbooks have survived socialist emancipation of women and they are still alive irrespective of the fact that their real life validity for the whole population of Slovakia is at best dubious. This approach encodes female fear of the public space and male incompetence in the private one, which has implications not only for division labour in childcare and household care but also in the public life.

Examples of texts in readers:

Mother is washing laundry in a washing machine (...) She washes it and hangs it. The washing machine is mom's good helper. She is putting the laundry in the washing machine.

*Mom was playing with my new shoe and Dad's pen. I don't know why - she is a gown-up. Even dad didn't know. He asked mom: What are you doing?
I'm writing down our address so that people will know where to bring back your daughter is she got lost at the football match, replied Mom.*

But what do about it? Textbooks are very important teaching aids – should we throw all of them away?

We should not but we can speak with children about the images of women and men in textbook and compare them with the diversity of reality. We can try to notice stereotypes in our own approach to children and to curriculum and strive for a gender sensitive approach. We can use subversive texts, or non-traditional interpretations of fairytales. Together with children, we can learn to critically perceive the “eternal” and “only” truths.

What Society Does Not Know

The school and people in it are part of the whole society; therefore the school will not teach what society does not know. The process of transformation of our society has brought about diversification. Sometimes it seems that society, or its parts, do already know, but the school has not learned yet. In the 1990s non-governmental women’s organizations were springing up and they were gradually opening up themes related to women’s human rights and especially to the unequal status of women and men. Feminist and gender studies programmes started to develop and books were published.⁴ Mainly in relation to the EU accession process, emerged also the first official instruments to foster equal opportunities of women and men in society (Department of Equal Opportunities at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and the *Conception of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men*). The *Conception* approved by the Government of the Slovak republic contains concrete provisions related to education such as modification of the curriculum to include gender equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender and sex and elimination of gender stereotypes. These provisions are in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that is binding also for the Slovak Republic. From the educational perspective especially relevant is namely article 5 in which states committed themselves to taking all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women; and also point (c) of Article 10 that commits the states to the elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods;

This means that the school will learn several basic things:

- Biological sex is determined by nature and its principles before the baby is born; at the latest in the moment of childbirth the baby’s gender starts to shape;
- Certain differences based on biological predispositions do exist but they do not justify the ideas about natural existence of the female and male role as given and the only correct ones, and do not justify unequal social status of women and men.
- The process of gender specific socialization of girls and boys has many layers and is taking place constantly; it is resistant to attempts at its conscious control. However, teachers – when creating the offer of co-ordinates of orientation and identification for their pupils, have the power to decide whether the school will uncritically participate in the reinforcement and reproduction of gender stereotypes or whether it will question them, uncover their meanings and open up new spaces for both girls and boys to shape their own forms of femininity and masculinity.

And that also means that through reflection on their own gender role and stereotypical images of women and men, all “school goers” will get a change of more self-conscious orientation in the world.

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Endnotes:

¹ The “male” way of seeing, in this respect, does not denote concrete individual perception of a male human being or a concrete man, but understanding and interpretation of things from the perspective of the dominant social status of men. This way of seeing regards the man as the universal representative of the humankind.

² We use the plural form of the word feminism to emphasize the fact that it is a very diverse social and ideational movement.

³ In our country we can speak about the second wave of feminism only after the year 1989. Since its beginning it has had a different course than in the USA and the countries of western Europe but it has drawn inspiration from their experience and theoretical reflection. At first, it was mainly focused on educational and publication activities (the feminist cultural magazine *Aspekt*, the Centre for Gender Studies at Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University in Bratislava) and later also on human rights activities (*Piata žena/The Fifth Women* – violence against women, *Možnosť voľby/Pro Choice* – women's reproductive rights).

⁴ The first steps were the Lecture Series in Feminist Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy Comenius University in Bratislava and the feminist cultural magazine *Aspekt* in Bratislava. You can find more information on publications at www.aspekt.sk.