

## FAST FACTS



10-30  
People



75  
Minutes



\$0



Medium  
Risk Level

## Early Learning About Gender Conformity

Adapted with permission from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*

**Purpose of Activity:** This exercise helps participants increase their understanding of gender as a social construct and as learned behavior. The purpose of this activity is to help participants begin thinking about gender as something we do and identify and think reflectively about their own genders. Moreover, the activity will help participants explore how gender is socially constructed and is performative.

### Ground Rules:

- Be fully present and participate at your own comfort level – challenge by choice.
- Follow up - What does it mean to be “fully present”?
- Follow up - What does “challenge by choice” mean?
- Push yourself outside of your comfort zone – the most learning happens when we are a little bit uncomfortable.
- Listen respectfully, share air time, and encourage others to participate.
- It’s ok for us all to be at different places with the things we discuss today.
- Show respect for one another’s beliefs, values, and experiences.
- Respect and maintain privacy.

### Disclaimer:

- If as facilitators you are not a member of the subordinated group (transgender, non-gender conforming, etc) focused on in this program, be sure to acknowledge that. Frame the conversation that you do not understand what it means to be of another gender from personal experience, nor are you an expert because this is the topic of the program. You are simply trying to be an ally by doing education on the topic.
- If someone DOES attend the program who is of the subordinated group, be sure not to single them out for the “transgender perspective,” stare at them to judge their reaction, or basically put them on the spot. They should be treated like every other student, and invite everyone to share/participate as much as she/he/ze is comfortable.

### Suggested Time Allocation:

- Introduction: 5 Minutes
- Learning Community Guidelines: 10 Minutes
- Instructions: 5 Minutes
- Activity: 30 Minutes
- Processing: 20 Minutes
- Conclusion: 5 Minutes

### Facilitation Guide:



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- **Introduction**
  - Thank the participants for coming to the program and introduce the program summary and learning outcomes.
  - Establish that this is an activity that may trigger certain emotions.
- **Learning Community Guidelines**
  - Establish learning community guidelines in order to create a safe learning environment, since the participants will be revealing personal details about themselves.
- **Instructions**
  - Inform the participants that they are going to explore some of their early learning about gender roles and gender conformity.
  - Encourage the participants to consider gendered messages in the broadest terms. In addition to thinking about what it means to be a girl or a boy they might reflect on messages they received about what it is to be feminine/masculine, ladylike/manly, weak/strong, and a mother/a father.
  - Remind the participants that although we all learn about gender and gender conformity as children, the specific messages that we receive will vary according to our cultural background, family situation, geographic context, and many other factors. However, even with this difference, we are also affected by the gender norms of the dominant culture as transmitted through media, schools, toys and games, and other people's assumptions about us.
  - Ask participants to pair up with someone they do not know. If there are an odd number of participants, one of the facilitators can pair up with them.
  - Inform them that they will discuss the four questions listed below in their pairs.
  - Bring the participants back together for a large group discussion based on the conversations they had in their pairs.
- **Questions:**
  - Describe the earliest time you remember being aware of your gender. (2 minutes each)
  - Describe a time as a child when you were told (explicitly or implicitly) that you should or should not do something because of your gender. (3 minutes each)
  - Describe the first time you remember being aware that someone else was doing something that stretched the boundaries of what was acceptable for them as a boy/man or girl/woman to do? What were they doing? What did you think of/feel about it? How did you and others respond? (5 minutes each)

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- Describe a time when your own understanding of your gender or what you should do as a boy/girl was in conflict with someone else's expectations. How did it feel to be in that situation? How do you make meaning of this situation in retrospect? Was the conflict related to other social identities such as race, class, sexual orientation, or age? (5 minutes each)

### Large Group Discussion and Processing:

- What emotions came up as you identified early gendered memories?
- What came up that was new or surprising?
- Did any themes emerge within your pair?
- What did you learn from these early experiences about your own gender?
- What did you learn from these early experiences about people who did not conform to gender expectations?
- Where do these messages come from?
- How have these early experiences affected how you do gender now? Is there anything that you do or do not do, because of your gender? Is there anything that you do, or do not do, in spite of your gender?
- If you had been socialized a boy rather than a girl, or a girl rather than a boy, what might be different about your behaviors? If you think your behaviors would be the same, how would it have been easier or more difficult for you to do that as a member of "the other" gender?
- What can you do with this information in the future?

**Possible Facilitation Issues:** This activity can trigger challenging questions and emotions from the participants. The facilitator should be experienced with and prepared for these situations. This activity should be done only in venues in which the facilitator feels comfortable handling issues that may arise.