Gender Stereotypes and Messages Received By Children

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Our society has been patriarchal since the dawn of civilization and gender relations has always been controlled by certain stereotypes favorable for men as the dominating sex. The acquisition of the gender role goes hand in hand with the process of socialization and the society literally makes individuals absorb the stereotypes and expectations imposed on them by their gender from early childhood. Even despite dramatic breakthroughs made by feminist movements during the 19th and 20th centuries seem to prove not efficient enough in fighting against sexism and gender stereotypes, which “can be conceptualized as the descriptive aspects of gender roles, as they depict the attributes that an individual ascribes” to males and females (Eisenchlas, 2013, p.2).

Male-dominated society infuses gender role stereotypes in every area of life including cultural, economic and educational spheres. Sexist ideas are widely cultivated in cinematography, fashion, music, educational books etc. The aim is certainly to plant the idea of gender difference in minds of both adults and children.

Children in particular are, to my thinking, the most vulnerable recipients of gender-related messages, which start coming from the outside world in early childhood with fairy tales narrating about strong, courageous and powerful men and beautiful, tender and shy women and overwhelming flow of mass media information, including commercials and advertising seen by children on TV or in the streets. Commercials are often aimed not only at attracting customers, but also at fostering people’s need and desire to conform to certain trends and stereotypes, in our case, gender stereotypes. These advertisements identify women’s view of masculinity and men’s view of femininity (Grover & Hundal, 2014, p.29); and the most important about this means of influence is that they emphasize appearance and external qualities in women and influence, power and successfulness in men. Thereby, watching such commercials, boys and girls absorb the gender stereotype that women are viewed as a beautiful decoration for successful and influential men. The same message is communicated by the bulk of consumer industry, for instance, apparel industry. Clothes intended for very small children with virtually unidentified gender have inscriptions planting gender stereotypes in perception and raising of children: e.g. onesies for girls have “I only date heroes” and those for boys are “Future man of steel” (Jane van Koeverden).

The gender-related messages children receive from the environment contribute to sexism and inequality. The described example of child onesies bears an implicit message that girls should be raised to become wives of “heroes”: prosperous powerful males, for whom they would be embellishment. This message is cultivated everywhere in various forms – modern popular musicians, especially rap and r’n’b singers, state with their song lyrics and music videos that the girl is associated with “sexy” and “beautiful” and the man equals “rich and confident”.

Another disturbing message lies in the propaganda of a certain image, a canon of feminine beauty. Watching reality shows featuring models, music videos, reading teen magazines and looking at fashion posters and promos, girls automatically absorb the message that an ideal of a woman accepted in the society (well, in the Western culture – for sure) is a thin tall girl with long legs, long hair and immaculate make-up, wearing attractive clothes etc. Affected by this stereotype, the society – both males and females “sort” women by they conformity to the standards, and little girls begin worrying about their appearance since childish years, when the beauty standard is originally expected to produce little impact on their self-perception and life. Similarly, the typical gender expectation imposed on boys makes them strive to be powerful, strong and authoritative, and this often results in morbid tendencies of self-affirmation at others’ expense.

Generally, this complex set of gender messages attacking both boys and girls forms a false perception of both genders in the society and, in addition, negatively affects treatment both of women and of men in terms of equality. Women’s potential is often underestimated, as they are expected to be the stand-by and the decoration for men rather than self-sufficient individuals capable of their own remarkable achievements and success. Men, in contrast, are judged rather critically both be females and by their “colleagues” in terms of their power, strength, financial success and influence. Thereby, those, who fail to conform to some of the standards, are labelled losers. The situation leaves much to be desired and wise and reasoned measures are to be taken in order to fix it. Of course, as far as these inadequate perceptions form in both in males and in females in childhood, much attention should be paid to gender education of children and the material provided for them in the process of their socialization. However, there are two different levels, from which gender role balance can be affected: there are immediate environment (parents, relatives, tutors etc.) and the level of the entire society’s culture. In former level, parents should filtrate information and examples they provide for their children, correctly adjust their attitude to raising of their children. The smallest things parents can do is avoid extremes in fostering either femininity or masculinity, choose clothes, literature and cartoons with care; mothers should care about girls’ intellectual development to the same extent they care about their daughters’ fancy clothes. On the other hand, the level of society and culture is far more difficult to fight: it is nearly impossible to isolate a child from all gender-charged messages coming from the outer world in mass media, art, fashion etc. Here, the nearly utopic transformation of society is needed, because – despite the waves of emancipation and feminists’ achieves in terms of equality and struggle against sexism, male-oriented stereotypes still remain in the core of our social order.

References

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