

## Sensitive Zone- Gender

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### *1. The gender issue: a very sensitive area!*

All societies have been built around the attribution of specific roles to men and women, but these roles can vary considerably from place to place and over time.<sup>1</sup>

Gender expresses the answer that each society has found, in its specific context, to fundamental questions such as:



Figure 1- Source: Pexels/@timmosholder

*What is a man? What is a woman?*

*What is the role and place of intersex individuals?*

*What should/can a male or female person do in the group?*

*What are the behaviours to be respected in their relationships?*

*Is it important to keep these gender differences distinct?*

*Who has power over whom? When?*

It is therefore a complex and divisive concept, because on the one hand it separates human beings into categories (men, women, intersex) and on the other hand it manifests itself through a multitude of behaviours and expectations that can be very different from one group to another and sometimes even within the same group.

For these reasons, gender is an extremely sensitive issue in almost all cultures.

Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 1986), in his work on cultural comparison, points out gender as one of the particularly sensitive elements in the encounter between people from different cultures. He calls it the "taboo dimension" because, in this area, cultures have many very strong prescriptions, and, for an individual, gender manifestations different from those dominant in his or her culture can be perceived as a threat as well as a manifestation of contempt for the other, or even oppression. These prescriptions touch on a multiplicity of dimensions that are fundamental to the definition of identity, such as marital and parental roles, the relationship between marriage and procreation, and more generally the interactions between men, women and their social environment.

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<sup>1</sup> "Social expectations of gender roles depend on the individual's socio-economic, political and cultural context, as well as other factors including race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and age. Gender roles are learned and vary greatly between and within human societies and, moreover, change over time."

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/gender>

Margalit Cohen-Emerique (Cohen-Emerique, 2011), when speaking of sensitive areas, refers to 'guiding images' (Chombart de Lauwe, 1967): 'powerful representations, not always conscious, but highly charged with affect, because they are anchored in the cultural foundations of the personality, in its unconscious dimensions such as parental and sexual identifications'<sup>2</sup>. An individual's representation of gender is based on these guiding images which form the basis of our identity construction. Using the metaphor of the iceberg (Kluckhohn 1948), we could say that this is the base of the iceberg, a founding and extremely sensitive area of individual and collective identity.

Other studies seem to confirm the importance of this sensitive zone.

Françoise Héritier (Héritier, 1996), drawing on the work of Lévi-Strauss, shows how, on the basis of the perception of the physical difference and the different role of the sexes in reproduction, humanity has conceived the fundamental binary category of its thinking, identical/different, and, on the basis of this model, has constructed the binary oppositions that we use to conceive of the social organisation and structure our map of the world (strong/weak, public/private, collective/individual).<sup>3</sup>

The collection of shocks experienced by the trainers confirms the sensitive dimension of gender: many shocks experienced in their professional practice are indeed linked to it. Based on these shocks, it seems interesting to us to focus our reflection on two dimensions of the construction of gender: that of the more or less strong differentiation between gender roles, and that of the binary separation between the genders.

## 2. Differentiation between gender roles



Figure 2 - Source:  
Pexels/@Lieven Soete

A first point of rupture in the reflection on gender was the one which made it possible to distinguish sex from gender. This was a founding operation, as it highlighted the fact that gender is not an immutable biological fact, but a social construction and as such relative and evolving.

Gender expresses what a given society expects of men and women. Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir, 1946) was the first to make a distinction between sex and gender: "One is not born a woman, but becomes one". She wanted to highlight the fact that gender identity is socially constructed from biological sex. This operation makes it possible to 'denaturalise' gender and raises a major issue: if the biological and the social are two distinct domains, then the idea that power inequalities between men and women stem from anatomical differences loses its obviousness.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this first proposition, several contributions from gender studies have shown how gender roles are the product of social construction, and can vary across contexts and over time.

One pillar of this field is the work of Margaret Mead<sup>5</sup>, who, as early as the 1930s, spoke of "sex roles": "*If certain attitudes which we regard as traditionally associated with the female temperament - such as passivity, love of children - can so easily be typical of men in one tribe,*

<sup>2</sup> Cohen-Emerique, 2011, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Mead, 1963, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Beren and others, 2020, p.68.

<sup>5</sup> Mead, 1966 ; Mead 1963.

*and in another, on the contrary, be rejected by the majority of men as women, we have no reason to believe that they are irrevocably determined by the sex of the individual.*"<sup>6</sup>

Through the observation of three societies in Papua New Guinea, she shows that the traits generally associated with gender are not directly derived from biological sex. The roles and attitudes of parents in the upbringing of children are not fixed, and can vary from one society to another. For example, among the Tchambouli, women are responsible for economic resources, and go hunting and fishing; the men, covered in ornaments, do sculpture, painting and dancing. Among the Arapesh, the father has the same responsibility as the mother for the total protection of the newborn child: after birth, he refrains from working and sleeps next to the mother without having sexual relations as long as the child is young. For Mundugumor women, motherhood is seen as an unpleasant burden, and their relationship with the infant is far from the stereotypical roles of the gentle and protective mother: "*they hate being pregnant and don't like children ... breastfeed their children standing up and push them away when they are satisfied*".<sup>7</sup>

Other examples identified more recently by other researchers confirm the existence of countless variables in the deployment of gender roles.

In particular, family patterns can be structured around more than just marriage and the roles of father and mother. For example, in the kinship system of the Nâ, a farming people living in the Yongning region of China, neither the notion of marriage nor that of paternity exists, and there is no term in their language to designate father or in-laws. The only socially existing ties are those of motherhood and siblings. The family model is not structured around the artificial couple: women and girls live with their brothers; men live with their sisters and nephews. Reproduction is based on the principle of 'nana sésé', i.e. furtive visits.<sup>8</sup>

These examples show how visions of gender roles and expectations are the product of a social construction and therefore strictly linked to the context that produced them.

Geert Hofstede has highlighted another important dimension in the construction of gender: the degree of differentiation between gender roles and the set of prescriptions given to each.<sup>9</sup> According to him, in some societies there is a strong distancing from the roles traditionally attributed to a woman or a man, while in others this distancing is less. This distancing can be expressed in a wide variety of practices and behaviours: professional choices of men and women, rules of interaction and politeness, dress codes, use of space, role within the family and distribution of power. Several of the shocks collected here revolve around this gender dimension and show that, often, depending on which of these trends one falls into, the clear separation of roles will be seen as a retrograde (and often oppressive) posture, while the trend towards interchangeability of roles will be seen as a threat to morality and the traditional family model.

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<sup>6</sup> Mead 1963 p. 311-312.

<sup>7</sup> Mead 1963, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Hua Cai 1997, in Pauli 2011.

<sup>9</sup> In his fundamental research (Hofstede, 1998), this Dutch sociologist proposes to measure the impact of culture on values and behaviour in the workplace along five dimensions: hierarchical distance, individualism/collectivism, control of uncertainty, long-term orientation and masculinity/femininity.



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The clashes identified revolve around issues of differentiation in the representation of space, differentiation in the roles and tasks assigned within the family, and the need to ensure that women's rights are respected.

Several examples of shocks are triggered by the need for a mixed space imposed by the training setting. These shocks clearly show that space is not neutral in all cultural contexts. In some cultures, male space is clearly separated from female space, and when men and women find themselves in a shared space, there are many norms that regulate interactions and define what may and may not be done by one or the other.

Thus, for example, in an incident reported by a trainer in a citizenship workshop for newcomers, it is noted that when a couple is in a mixed context, for example in a training room with both men and women.

*“In the trainings for newcomers, I often alternate activities in sub-groups and in plenary. I sometimes propose games to create a link in the group.*

*In one group I proposed the game "lemons-lemons" which consists in changing places quickly in a random way.*

*One participant came to me and said that she would rather not participate in the game.*

*Later she explained that the game made her feel uncomfortable because in her community it is not a good idea for a woman to sit next to a man who is not her husband, especially if her husband is in the same room.”*

Similarly, in the episode reported by a French language trainer :

*“The door of my classroom was open, a gentleman came into the corridor and when he saw the mixed group in class he shouted "ah! There are men! My wife is not coming!" Without any prior greeting. I was taken aback by this outburst of aggression. He continued shouting: "there are men, there are men, are there classes only with women?"*

*His young wife stood back with a frightened look in her eyes. I called my co-ordinator who reframed him, telling him that it was his wife who had to take the steps to register and declare her identity (to be autonomous) and that he could just accompany her. This gentleman left with his wife, a little as he had come, without greeting. The learners in my class witnessed the scene, and one of them made a comment that they can be like that in her country. I understood from this remark that the man can use his authority when it comes to his wife.*

*I have a horrifying memory of this mini-altercation, both in substance and in form.”*

In this situation the fact that the class is mixed leads a man to forbid his wife to attend the training. For this man, it is inconceivable that his wife could interact in a mixed space in the presence of other men who are not part of the family.

This reaction is a source of shock for the trainer, especially since his mission as a citizenship trainer is to encourage the emergence of a common culture in the group by creating opportunities for exchanges and encounters between people of different origins, and the mixing of participants in the training room is for him an essential tool to achieve this objective. For the participants, this imposed mixing can also be experienced as a shock, because as Margalit Cohen-Emerique points out, "in Western civilisation, space is organised according to tasks and ages, according to a principle totally foreign to the segregation of the sexes and to the notion of separate and controlled space as in Muslim societies".

Moreover, for the trainer who has integrated 'Western' values of equality, such behaviour can be perceived as discriminatory towards women and provokes - even unconsciously - a reaction of hostility towards men, who become perceived here as oppressors.

Indeed, as this example shows, gender norms as a system that regulates relations between men and women are inextricably linked to power relations and hierarchies.



The trainer may then experience a particularly strong tension, as this kind of situation confronts him/her with the fact that he/she may himself/herself be the bearer of those stereotypes he/she is tasked to dispel: the alleged superiority of Western gender models over the "backward" gender models of migrants.

Thus, the strong reaction of the French language trainer can be explained by the fact that she felt particularly threatened in the values of emancipation and equality of women that she holds dear:

Figure 3 - Source: Pexels/@Lieven Soete

*"His young wife stood back with a frightened look on her face. I called my coordinator who admonished him and clarified that it was up to his wife to register and declare her identity (to be autonomous) and that he could just accompany her."*

Indeed, Margalit Cohen-Emerique stresses that one of the main causes of shock reactions is the "fear of the return of archaisms", i.e. the return of models considered outdated and long fought against, to the detriment of recent advances which are felt to be fragile and in need of protection.<sup>10</sup>

In the episode "Who does the dishes?" two trainers participate with their group in the lunch break meal.

*"In my former job we organised information sessions for undocumented people. It was called an orientation course. The aim was to give the participants necessary information on access to health care and education as well as on labour law and the possibilities of regularisation of residence. The course also included a short presentation of Belgium's history and politics. The objective is that the person should be able to know the situation in which he or she finds himself or herself in order to be able to define a project in spite of the administrative blockage. The training is spread over 3 days.*

*One day during the lunch break when we were cleaning the table after the meal my colleague remarked that only women were doing the dishes so she turned to the male participants and invited them to help the women by saying "here in Belgium men have to help with the household chores!"*

*I was surprised by her reaction, even though I didn't say anything, I found her moralizing and arrogant. I found the time and place not appropriate for this debate. For me it was an unhealthy provocation.*

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen-Emerique, 2011, p. 180.

*The colleague in question is from Brussels of Flemish origin, a social worker, she studied sociology”.*

The trainer notes that the women have taken over all the household tasks (meal, cleaning, preparation), while the men have limited themselves to bringing drinks. She was shocked by this unequal division of labour and, turning to the male participants, urged them to help the women by saying "here in Belgium, the man has to do the housework!"

The trainer is confronted here with a model of role distribution in which there is a strong separation between the tasks attributed to men and those attributed to women. From the narrator's point of view, which is based on an egalitarian model of role interchangeability, such a disparity in the division of tasks is unacceptable. Her colleague, who has a reference frame very similar to that of the participants, perceives her colleague's reaction as a lack of ability to maintain a 'professional distance'. Her attachment to the values of equality and women's emancipation makes her unable, in the eyes of her colleague, to take into account the fact that this is a group of newcomers still strongly rooted in the cultural context of their country of origin.

As Margalit Cohen-Emerique shows, this type of shock is felt very strongly "by these professionals, who are particularly sensitive both professionally and personally to this fundamental achievement of modernity, which is (the requirement of) gender equality. The encounter with situations that ignore it triggers a revolt that is often accompanied by an attempt to impose (...) a status of equality in the couple".<sup>11</sup>

In the context of interaction, the codes and rules that govern relations between men and women are numerous and complex and often a source of misunderstanding, especially when they involve physical proximity.

What happens when a man and a woman share an intimate space? When bodies come very close together in a dance?

The following examples show how awareness of the body as a symbolic support of one's gender emerges through physical proximity and shared space. In this context, differences in socialisation codes can lead to misunderstandings about the nature of the relationship and to behaviour that is considered inappropriate or even aggressive.

As part of its missions, an association organises dance classes and other leisure activities to encourage encounters between Belgians and migrants.

The dance class leaders report several incidents related to proximity and socialisation codes.

In the episode "She smiles at me, so she wants me", a woman takes the initiative of inviting a young man to dance; she agrees to dance with him several times, and smiles at him. Gradually, the young man holds his partner tighter and tighter. The woman was very upset by this behaviour and complained to the organiser.

*“During a dance workshop a young man is holding his partner tighter and tighter. The dancer complains with me, so I tell the young man about it. He replies that the fact that they are so close, touching and smiling at each other, are for him signs that the relationship can move towards greater intimacy: "If she smiles at me, she wants me! »*

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen-Emerique, 2011, p. 231.

For the young man, a woman who takes the initiative to invite him is quite unusual, because in his system of reference, it is usually the men who do this. Moreover, the close proximity of the bodies and the smiles make him interpret his partner's behaviour as attempts at seduction.

In the same context, other participants complain about the insistence of certain men who go so far as to take the dancer's hand and drag her onto the dance floor: "you could be my sister, you can't refuse to dance if I invite you!" In this example, the man feels entitled to take the initiative, regardless of his partner's disapproval.

In both situations, the men's behaviour is perceived by the protagonists as disrespectful and prevaricating, whereas in the young people's frame of reference, such behaviour seems to be quite acceptable according to the norms that regulate interactions in a festive and informal context.

### 3. *Two sexes and two genders?*

Another group of shocks gathered in this collection seem to challenge the traditional vision that tends to separate the genders according to the binary vision of feminine and masculine. This dichotomy is strongly present in our societies, to the point of appearing to be a natural and immutable given, but are we right in believing that this binary vision is universally shared, or is it also the result of a social construction, and the product of a given society in a given context? What if the positing of a strong and necessary correlation between biological sex and gender is less universal than we thought?<sup>12</sup>

As Pauli points out: "If in our North-Western societies it is common to link gender identity to biological sex based on an exclusive binary vision, either male or female, from birth to death, there are cultures that have provided for 'the flexibility of genderisation'".<sup>13</sup> He observes that in Inuit cultures, babies can be assigned a social role independently of their biological sex, according to the expectations and needs of group life: if a family has several children of the same biological sex, they can choose to assign the other social sex to the newborn and raise him/her as such.



Figure 4- Source: Pexels/@rodnae-prod

The parallelism between social and biological sex will only be re-established, depending on the different ethnic groups, from pre-adolescence onwards. Gender can also be defined by a transgenerational transmission: the baby will inherit the gender and name of an ancestor who transmitted through a dream to the parents his or her will to return to the child's body. A third possibility of attribution is in relation to shamanism, and it affects special children who will be invested with magical power, and live in the skin of a gender other than their genital sex. "Thus,

<sup>12</sup> Numerous studies, particularly from the 1990s onwards, have shown that the definition of sex varies widely depending on the cultures and periods studied, and that it is not systematically based on a strict dichotomy (Raz, 2021). These studies also invite us to go beyond the nature-culture binary vision, by putting forward the hypothesis that both sex and gender are the product of a social construction. Descola's work from the 1980s onwards is the basis of the critique of the nature/culture dualism. According to Descola, this distinction is a specific and recent production of Western culture; it is absent from other cultures and constitutes an obstacle to understanding them. Descola, *Par de-là nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Pauli, 2011, p.5

the Inuit do not close sex and gender, they do not conceptualise them in rigid and limited categories; the frontier is flexible and adaptable so that the balance of the group is constant.<sup>14</sup>

The Hijras<sup>15</sup> of India or Bangladesh are one of the best known examples in the contemporary world of challenging gender binarity. They may be born intersex or have male genitalia, dress like women and generally consider themselves neither male nor female.



Figure 5- Source: Public domain/USAID  
Bangladesh

In indigenous cultures in North America, gender non-conforming identities are collectively referred to as "Two-Spirits".<sup>16</sup> Examples are the Winkte people of the Lakpota culture, the Ninauposkitzpe ("women with a man's heart") of the Black Pides Native American community.

Thus, some indigenous nations consider that there are at least four genders:

- male men
- female women
- men with feminine tendencies
- women with male tendencies

This categorisation can only be understood in the cultural context of North American indigenous societies. It is not necessarily related to sexuality and does not correspond to Western LGBTQ+ categories.

Furthermore, several studies invite us to deconstruct the way we conceive of the difference between the sexes and to question the biological basis of binarity<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, this binary view is increasingly criticised, even in Western culture, and particularly among the younger generations.<sup>18</sup> On the basis of multidisciplinary contributions<sup>19</sup> (notably biology and history), non-binary identifications are increasingly asserting themselves by proposing to see gender as a continuum between the feminine and the masculine, which goes beyond the traditional dichotomy. Thus, the concept of gender fluidity allows us to conceive that an individual can carry a gender identity that can evolve over time and in different contexts<sup>20</sup>.

Around the claim of a non-binary identity are articulated different shocks identified in this collection<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Pauli, 2011, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra\\_\(South\\_Asia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra_(South_Asia))

<sup>16</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two-spirit>

<sup>17</sup> See on these point : Buttler 2009; Delphy 2001, Fausto-Sterling 2012, Rougharden 2012

<sup>18</sup> See in particular on the evolution of the binary view of gender, Alessandrin, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Priscille Touraille's studies on the height of boys and girls (Touraille, 2008) also emphasise that cultural behaviour has a significant influence on our physical appearance. Research on the animal world also seems to support this questioning of the biological basis of binarity. For example, Joan Rougharden (Rougharden, 2012) highlights the plurality of gendered forms in the animal kingdom. From a historical perspective Thomas Laqueur (Laqueur, 1992) describes the transformation in models of sex. According to him, the unisex model, according to which men and women share the same nature, was dominant in the West until the Enlightenment, and it is only in the eighteenth century that the perception of the two sexes as each having a distinct and 'incommensurable' nature emerges.

<sup>20</sup> Alessandrini, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> See in IO1, windows 2: Sensitive Zone, Gender.



In “The offended participant” example:

*A trainee after the analysis of culture shock and the discussion in plenary remained silent until the moment of the final check in which she said the trainer offended her with regard to the topic of gender difference.*

In the “I’m a queer” example

*“When dealing with the issue of gender differences, during the debriefing of an exercise, I proposed the division of the group into males and females and a female student challenged me saying that neither of the two genders represented her and that she asked for the inclusion of a third group called 'queer'.”*

As part of the "Development and Cultural Mediation Agent" training, the CBAI (Belgium) offers a module on the "Intercultural Approach", in which we work, among other subjects, on the concept of identity. During this training...

*“In an introductory activity to the module, I ask the participants to define their sex/gender in one sentence. Two participants (in two different groups) expressed the impossibility of defining their gender in a fixed way. They claim an identity that can oscillate between two poles depending on the phases of life "there are moments when I feel more male and others more female, depending on what I am experiencing at that moment" or the relational context of the moment "depending on the person I am attracted to".*

*These two participants clearly expressed that it was very important for them to have this freedom to define (or not to define) their gender beyond the usual and dominant categories.*

*In the context of the training, these definitions shocked several participants: for some of them, these statements were downright inconceivable and meaningless.”*

These are mostly people who come from a context where there is a strong separation of gender roles. Men and women are supposed to be clearly distinguished by different behaviour and characteristics. This traditional division (derived from sacred texts) guarantees the continuity of the classical representation of the family. To depart from this pattern would jeopardise the very functioning of the basic community unit.

These shocks point to the emergence of a questioning that seems to arise among a relatively young audience<sup>22</sup> and that particularly concerns the contestation of the binary vision of gender, felt as a form of constraint or domination by some participants in the training courses. In these shocks, the very attitude of the trainer is questioned. By proposing a division of the group according to a traditional binary vision (men on one side and women on the other), he involuntarily reinforced the majority vision marginalising the participants who did not recognise themselves in this division

As a trainer, it is important to be aware that bicategorisation can function as the basis for a normalisation of bodies, identities and behaviours, excluding those who do not conform. Furthermore, for the trainer himself, this can be a particularly sensitive area, either because he is anchored in a binary vision and may be confronted in the context of training with an

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<sup>22</sup> On the relatively recent emergence of an identity claim that undermines the traditional binary view, see: Alessandrini 2019.



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awareness of the normative and coercive impact of this dualism, or because he himself is the bearer of a non-binary identity in a context where this is still far from being accepted without judgement, both by the public and by institutions. In the context of training, it may therefore be important for the trainer to draw on ethnographic knowledge that can help the group to put its vision of gender into perspective, as well as to reflect on a framework that allows all participants to express their identity beyond the dominant vision, and finally to ask themselves: "as a trainer, how can I take into account these sensitive areas of the participants, as well as my own, so that these potential fragilities do not become areas of vulnerability that hinder intercultural communication?"

## Ressources (Who invented this activity or who inspired it)

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